

**Doing Late Modern Community: British Pagans
and the Processes of Group Membership**

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Abstract

This thesis is concerned with the notion of ‘community’ in late modernity. It approaches the topic via a grounded qualitative empirical study into processes of group membership as practiced by contemporary Pagans in Britain. Part One consists of an exploration of texts to explicate theories of community, group processes and Paganism in sociological research. The first chapter explores key theories of community as expressed in sociological literature and focuses specifically on the work of three authors: Ferdinand Tönnies, Anthony Cohen and Michel Maffesoli. Chapter Two is an explication of research into group processes as expressed by the vocabulary of Social Psychology. After presenting a characterisation of contemporary Paganism and its relationship to academic literature in Chapter Three, the second section of the thesis uses the methods of participant observation and the long interview to explore community ‘in use’ in different contexts. Each chapter examines the interaction of Pagans in a different setting, noting the shaping of community in each. Part Three of the thesis is an extension of this into an analysis of Pagan life-histories, as told in semi-structured interviews. Finally conclusions are drawn that, in revisiting the three principal authors, community in late modernity can be understood as a collection of integrated micro-social processes that incorporate claims of expertise, knowledge and belonging.

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Introduction

This thesis is about a seemingly ephemeral but nonetheless highly socially significant notion of “community”. The conception – that of a social bond between members – is consequential in that it is utilised, or at the very least its underlying ideas are implied, in an almost infinite number of contemporary discourses. In one sense it is conceivable to argue that as ideas of “community” are expressed in so many different ways, focussing upon it ‘one more time’ will be an empty exercise. Surely Sociology does not need yet one more grand theory about the sweeping changes incurred by increasing individualism, globalisation or technological transformations? We already have very well constructed treatises on these topics stretching back to the inception of the social sciences. Yet, despite this fact, community ceases to disappear as a defining principle in the lives of many people, and many theorists. In fact, the production of texts assessing concepts of community continues unabated. In 2001 Zigmunt Bauman produced one book on community, noting that it increases in significance when viewed as a nostalgic and ‘safe’ space. 2003 saw another text by Gerard Delanty, exploring the various facets of community and pointing out confidently that “the revival of community today is undoubtedly connected with the crisis of belonging in its relation to place” (Delanty, 2003: 195). It is perhaps accurate to propose that although the term ‘community’ contains multiple meanings, the very multifaceted nature is what makes it interesting for study. The current political climate and rapid increase in the use of the internet only adds to the importance of understanding the character of contemporary community when a very real fear exists for many about what lies beyond their own network.

Despite this continued need to approach community it is easy to be overwhelmed by the weight of the concept. Community can in many senses be seen as an all-encompassing concept that, in its insistence on togetherness, bonding and consensus leaves little room for the everyday interaction of individuals. And yet, as argued by Michel Maffesoli (1996), it is from individuals in small groups that community can now be found. There is a gulf, then, between what many have written about community and an understanding of how, in a time when it appears to be more a polemic rather than actuality, people are able to use the concept to form relationships and structure their lives. It is this space that forms the starting point for my work. This thesis, unlike the principal writings on community in late modernity, takes the focus to where community is done by people beyond macro-social theory. It examines community as an observable set of phenomena that, in their use,

generate social ordering on a micro-scale. It is a study of community *in process* rather than community as normative prescription. The central question to be examined is: what can be said of community in its micro-socially observable form, as experienced and enacted by members.

The thesis consists of three parts that combined answer the main research question. There are feasibly many approaches that could be taken to explore the area, and much of the direction would inevitably be dependent on the theoretical position adopted. With this in mind, the first chapter, entitled ‘Community in Sociological Theory,’ gives a brief explication of the most prominent sociological theories of community. It locates the question of community in late modernity by examining three key texts, Ferdinand Tönnies’ ([1887] 2001) *Community and Society*, Antony Cohen’s (1985) *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, and Michel Maffesoli’s ([1988] 1996) *The Time of the Tribes*. The subsequent chapter takes the theories of group processes as its centre, thereby providing a vocabulary to be used in the later ethnographic analysis. To conclude Part One of the thesis, Chapter Three gives a brief exploration of contemporary Paganism as a form of late modern dialogue with academic writing. It therefore presents an overview of some of the aspects of the religion and those who define themselves as ‘Pagan’.

Helen Berger (1999) in her study of ‘Neo-Paganism’ in the United States argues that contemporary Paganism should be considered a religion of late modernity. As evidence for this she gives comparisons with gay and lesbian communities, and suggests that community in late modernity is largely about choice. Although this simplifies the debates about gay or lesbian identity, contemporary Paganism in Britain can be seen to fit this analysis. While members may indeed argue that they were ‘born’ into the community, it does largely follow a pattern of lifestyle selection, and most members will be quite open about how they ‘discovered’ the religion. Additionally, the fact that to a large extent it does not rely on specific location – Pagans like many late modern individuals are geographically mobile – denotes that it can be considered to be a community of late modernity. Nevertheless, active involvement of some kind remains necessary in order to generate this community of choice. Members do meet regularly, and these smaller groups become the axial point at which the larger Pagan community is constructed. This thesis uses these smaller groups as the basis for research, and it is this ethnography that forms the basis for Part Two. The emphasis on the context within which these groups meet is not accidental or for mere convenience; it will be seen that contexts in many ways shapes

the processes within the communities. The third Part of this text is a continuation of this, and takes another context – that of the telling of a life history – to explore the identities of Pagans as given in a narrative setting. Part Four concludes the thesis and explores these context-fashioned processes together, suggesting ways in which contemporary community can be understood in the light of the preceding analysis.

Part I: Theoretical Contexts

Chapter One: Community in Sociological Theory

Introduction

Take even a cursory glance at the world in which we live and it becomes clear that ‘community’, in some shape or form, is one of the key aspects of contemporary life. It might not be immediately apparent, but let us study a typical day: our letterboxes provide political rhetoric about ‘building community’ in the inner cities; switch on the television and it won’t be long before news bulletins raise issues of boundaries between ethnic communities, or demonstrate the same political rhetoric that has arrived in your postbag. This is one effect of the increasing rise in the use of community rhetoric and social policy that occurred in the last decade, most noticeably in the health sector where ‘community care’ programs dominated attempts at addressing mental health management. In the United States, the idea of community has become an active consideration in restructuring social life, a prominent example being the communitarian movement pushed by Amitai Etzioni. We have the ‘European Community’ and the ‘international community’ of the United Nations, and a multitude of other political ‘communities’. The topic has become even more significant in the current international environment of anti-terrorism. It is precisely because concepts of community are so powerful that the present communitarian and current political ideals sit so well side by side.

There is, however, another theme within the multiple notions of community that appears to have little in common with the prescriptive political ideals espoused by the communitarian movement. This is more ephemeral, unstable and creative, belonging less to governmental power, instead being part of the process of everyday group structure and interaction on a micro-scale. This is the arena of the locale as a binding force, ‘proxemics’ to use Maffesoli’s (1996) term. Community, when understood from this inter-personal perspective, becomes something more than an ideological concept: it transforms into the dominant aspect of the contemporary social world. Yet with the advent and subsequent boom in personal internet usage, there is a possibility that even this awareness of the concept may not be accurate enough. What is the value of locale, when individuals form collectives and groups via email or instant text messaging, without residing in the same geographical area, even to the extent that they may never meet in person? Indeed, does

the notion of ‘community’ hold any worth at all in this context? These are important questions to examine and resolve, not least because, as mentioned above, the term appears so frequently in our everyday lives.

One of the criticisms that has been directed at this topic is that it has been, and continues to be, emotive in nature (Bell and Newby, 1971). This has been seen as something to be overcome – to escape the inherent nostalgia in the concept, and to therefore arrive at a more scientifically valid understanding (Brint, 2001). However, rather than answer this claim with an outright rejection of community as an object of study, or to retreat into theory over empiricism, it is more effective to make the claim a topic into itself. How do people use this emotive framework? How do they work within it to give it meaning, to express their belonging? How in fact, are they able to find agreement in their *doing* of community? While it is not possible to see ‘inside their minds’, sociological research can analyse observable behaviour, and this should be the starting point of study. Nevertheless, it is the case that the way in which community is initially defined by the sociologist affects the process and outcome of their analysis, leading to a need to present at least a working interpretation from the outset.

This chapter consequently has a threefold purpose. Principally, the prominent sociological understandings of community are explored, with an aim to providing terms of reference for the analytical study to follow. Where sociology has examined ideas of community – itself an analytical concept – it tended in the most part to be on a broadly macro-social level, focussing on large-scale social groupings or abstractions, at least until ethnographic approaches were adopted more fully. In order to examine this, the early sociological conceptions are briefly explored with an emphasis on the theory of Ferdinand Tönnies, the most prominent theorist in this area. These are contrasted with more recent writings on the subject, forming the second aim, which is to examine the idea that community may be understood as a set of complex *micro*-social phenomena. The principal author, examined in some detail, is Anthony Cohen, who claims that community is symbolically constructed. Finally, and as an extension of this, a view of what may be described as ‘postmodern’ community is explored, by utilising the work of Michel Maffesoli. This includes a consideration of the effects that the use of new communication technologies have on community as a useful or necessary concept. One chapter cannot do justice to the many texts that have been published on the topic of ‘community’ or that analyse the field in all but name. There are recent books that approach that task in detail (Bauman, 2001;

Delanty, 2003). Therefore this chapter serves only to introduce some of the key works that inform the rest of this thesis, and that illustrate well the ‘turning points’ in analyses of community.

Community and Society: Ferdinand Tönnies

Since early in the history of the social sciences, community in some form has been a dominant concern. Taking note of the large groups examined by Durkheim, Weber, Marx and others, it is perhaps even possible to suggest that community has been the principal object of study since the inception of Sociology as a discipline itself. Sociology was, and arguably still is, the study of social cohesion and maintenance in its varied forms. If one is to understand how community has been traditionally understood within the discipline, a brief examination of these early dominant explanations is necessary.

The primary terms of reference in this area come from Ferdinand Tönnies, and his 1887 work *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, usually translated as ‘Community and Society’, but also as ‘Community and Association’ (trans. Loomis, 1955). This text was published during the first year of Durkheim’s membership of the faculty at Bordeaux (Tiryakian in Bottomore and Nisbet, 1978), and the two theorists’ approaches to the topic have much in common, in that they both wish to understand the industrialisation of the time. Initially, Tönnies wants to distinguish ‘community’ (*Gemeinschaft*) from more ‘common’ usages. He begins by stating the essential argument:

[E]veryone who praises rural life has pointed to the fact that people there have a stronger and livelier sense of Community. Community means genuine, enduring life together, whereas Society is a transient and superficial thing. Thus *Gemeinschaft* must be understood as a living organism in its own right, while *Gesellschaft* is a mechanical aggregate and artefact (Tönnies, [1887] 2001: 19)

It is clear that Tönnies is presenting what he understands to be a social fact distinct from the organisational structures of an objective association. A relationship based purely on association would, from the perspective of Tönnies, be an example of society (*gesellschaft*), not community. This explanation fits quite aptly with a common sense understanding of how large organisations and small groups operate; however the issues are considered by Tönnies to be much greater, and yet, they become more elusive as one

examines them more closely. *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, the crowning concepts within Tönnies' work, are divided by their characterisation as being either "motherly love, sexual love, brotherly and sisterly love" (Cahnman and Heberle, 1971:76), if the former, or being principally an act of exchange, if the latter. *Gesellschaft* is conceived of as being best described "if it is thought of as performed by individuals who are alien to each other" (Cahnman and Heberle, 1971:76). This is not to say that there are not relationships between people acting in a *Gesellschaft* group, it is that, "in *Gemeinschaft* they stay together in spite of everything that separates them; in *Gesellschaft* they remain separate in spite of everything that unites them" (Tönnies, [1887] 2001: 52). Evidently, these two concepts are ideal types, and work best when followed through to their logical conclusion, as is done by Tönnies to arrive at an understanding of *Gesellschaft* as action that leads to territories, towns and cities, while *Gemeinschaft* is "all kinds of social co-existence that are familiar, comfortable and exclusive" (Tönnies, 2001: 18), seemingly disappearing under the influence of industrialisation. By following this argument, he is able to arrive at a model distinction between Community and Society, with their concrete supporting structures:

A. Community [*Gemeinschaft*]

1. Family life = concord. Man is involved in this with all his being. Its core is the *tribe, nation or common people*.
2. Village life = custom (traditional morality). Man is involved here with all his heart and soul. Its core is the *commonwealth*.
3. Town life = religion. Man is involved in this with his entire conscience. Its core is the *Church*.

B. Society [*Gesellschaft*]

1. Big city life = convention. This is based on the individual human being with all his ambitions. Its core is *competitive market Society in its most basic form*.
2. National life = politics and policy. This is based on man's collective calculations. Its core is the *state*.
3. Cosmopolitan life = public opinion. This is determined by man's consciousness. Its core is the *republic of letters*.

(Tönnies, [1887] 2001: 257)

Tönnies' concept of *Gemeinschaft* has become a standard interpretation of community, and continues to be referred to in recent studies conducted on a wide range of topics (Driskell and Lyon, 2002; De Cindo et al, 2003; Kornbeck, 2001; Lowe, 2000). The defence of the concept used in sociology and political science shows no sign of abating, despite the difficulties with which 'community' presents. For example, in 2001, Steven Brint published an article, "*Gemeinschaft* Revisited: A Critique and Reconstruction of the Community Concept", in which he assesses understandings of community in the context of communitarian and liberal conflict, seeking to understand its application in the contemporary political world. Brint argues that two lines of development could be seen in the analyses of community in sociology, essentially following either Ferdinand Tönnies or Durkheim, and that the former "has failed to yield valuable scientific generalizations" due to it becoming "bogged down in a conflict of romanticizing" (Brint, 2001:2). This, he suggests, is because Tönnies has failed to separate himself from sentimental perceptions of village life over urban life. He places the community studies field within this tradition, citing as one of the problems that lead to its demise, the debates over the meaning of the term 'community'. Additionally he rejects studies of subcultures, which similarly have failed to generalise to his satisfaction. Nevertheless, he refuses to reject the idea of *Gemeinschaft* entirely, and attempts to reconstruct an understanding of community by presenting various 'sub-types' of the community concept.

Brint's lengthy theoretical argument highlights the difficulties of working on this topic. His critique is clearly based upon a methodological conflict, rather than 'simply' a conceptual one as he claims, with his positivist leanings rejecting the nuanced accounts of micro-social interaction. Nevertheless, the assessment that Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft* is sentimental is perhaps not unwarranted. We can understand this if we place Tönnies in context. Germany at the time of publication was in a period of intense change. In 1873 the stock exchange crashed, and this combined with rapid industrialisation had led many people to question the benefits of capitalism and urbanisation. At the time of the writing of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, Germany already had a well-established tradition of *Heimat Kunst* – the cultural movement connected with nostalgic notions of 'home'. In fact, Tönnies was born in the same year (1855) as Ganghofer, arguably the leader of that tradition of storytelling, poetry and art, and it would have been inescapable as a cultural backdrop into which he worked. This is not to say that he was part of that movement himself, but clearly many of the concepts in *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* and the

Heimat Kunst tradition are similar: they were both responses to the industrialisation of Germany, that, for example, favoured ideas of rurality over the urban. The novels produced in this tradition have common themes, such as village life as ‘home’, images of being in harmony with nature, and the positive identification with a locality (Umbach, 2002). Confino (1997) has argued that it was *Heimat* that enabled the German peoples to accept growth of nationalism. Other publications in the same period of time were Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl’s (1954-1969) four-volume work “Natural History of Peoples as a Foundation for a German Social Policy” (*Naturgeschichte des Volkes als Grundlage einer deutschen Social-Politik*) and the earlier works of Karl May. Hartmann (1994) has argued that the conventional contrast between Ganghofer and May is in error, suggesting that the image of ‘home’ presents a link between both sets of writings. She remarks that despite the wanderings of May’s characters in the frontier, there exist moments of ‘home’ that present ideals of safety and community.

It is immediately apparent, therefore, that the idea of *Gemeinschaft* was not merely invented by Tönnies out of the blue, but emerged from a huge cultural revulsion of encroaching urbanism and capitalism. We can understand the concept *Gemeinschaft* as an attempt to provide an antidote to the industrial upset of the time. This has important ramifications in the present political climate of the early 21st century, where a re-emphasising of community in national and international politics is occurring.

Additionally, we can also infer that Durkheim, who Brint (2001) argues developed a better model of understanding community, is not immune to these cultural influences himself. Brint places Durkheim in opposition to Tönnies, stating that the ‘structural’ analysis of Durkheim and subsequent sociologists (in which rather confusingly includes both Robert Merton and Erving Goffmann) has been more productive in understanding community. While it is true that both authors took different approaches to the topic, Durkheim agrees with the essential importance of *Gemeinschaft* and has a similar bipolar conception. In *The Division of Labour in Society* ([1883] 1964) he further sees Society as being characterised by either ‘mechanical’ or ‘organic’ solidarity, based upon its development and depending upon the extent to which social differentiation exists (Tiryakian in Bottomore and Nisbet, 1978). If we are to utilise the initial relationship between Community and Society given by Tönnies, the division becomes even more complicated, especially as it appears that the sentiment derived from the relational character of mechanical solidarity appears to describe aptly what Tönnies defined as Community. Delanty (2003) has stated that Durkheim reversed Tönnies’ thesis in his theory. Yet, this

is to deny the underlying meaning of ‘community’ as displayed in the culture at the time. Despite the fact that Durkheim and Tönnies’ approaches to industrialisation differ, they both emerged at a time when the *sense* of community was important. Tönnies provides us with a clue in his assertion that Community, more so than Society, is a set of relationships that “attains fulfilment in friendship” (Cahnman and Heberle, 1971: 68).

It is now possible to see that, despite the fact that it was written in the 19th century, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* remains relevant in studies of contemporary communities. It will be seen that a consideration of Tönnies’ argument is significant for the analysis presented in this thesis for several reasons. The first of one is as suggested above, that community can be understood as a set of relations that present themselves as being ‘natural’ and organic. It must be noted that Tönnies rejects the suggestion that this cannot co-exist with unnatural, associative groupings or that the lines between are permanent:

From another angle, all these *Gemeinschaft* relationships are capable in certain circumstances of being transformed into mere mutual interchanges, self-interested and easily broken (Tönnies, 2001: 254)

Secondly, it is useful at this stage to recognise the significance of ‘location’ in Tönnies’ thesis. He repeatedly uses physical locations to define his theory, and these are often representative of an image of ‘home’. The issue will be raised as to the validity of this in a world where physical space is argued to become less important due to the development of heightened information and communication technologies (for example, Gergen, 1991; Turkle, 1995; Wellman, 2001).

Community as Symbolic: Anthony Cohen

Is the *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* dichotomy an appropriate way to understand community? If one wants to examine community in action and behaviour in contemporary times, is this a suitable perspective to take? It appears that, from the perspective of grand social theory, this definition is well used; attempting to apply macro-social concepts empirically to micro-social research settings prompts questions of transferability. The difficulty lies in its abstract quality: Tönnies himself states that *Gemeinschaft* is characterised by ‘essential will’ and *Gesellschaft* by ‘arbitrary’ will (Cahnman and Heberle, 1971), appearing to require a form of psychological explication of

conscious or unconscious motivation. Yet, it is also clear that Community is more than a differentiation between the state and human 'essential' action. Tönnies' solution, as noted above, is to emphasise the notion of similarity in conditions of life, kinship, and of the interdependence between individuals. This leads to the need and desire to act together (*Zusammenwesen*), which "is the basis and form of the most spiritual relationship, which may be understood as friendship" (Cahnman and Heberle, 1971). Community therefore becomes more than a rational necessity or an antithesis of the state. Indeed it is evidently part of this organisational structure, but it has more ethereal qualities, expressed by Tönnies in his conception of 'friendship'.

The idea that community requires similarity in one form or another continues to dominate community theory, even in recent works by 'postmodern' theorists:

However we try to justify or explain the 'togetherness' of the community, its unity, its genuine or merely desired persistence, it is the *spiritual* unity, subject to a shared spiritual authority, that we have in mind first and foremost, without it, there is no community. (Bauman, 1990:72)

Zigmunt Bauman here gives a clear explication of the common-sense definition of community, and it is notable that he suggests that community denotes 'togetherness'. The issue of what he perceives as a shared 'spiritual authority' is significant if, as in this thesis, the 'community' does not seemingly hold to any one 'church'. Must members of a community have observable similarities, or is togetherness, friendship, and even similarity more of a construction than a 'reality'? Bauman (1990) argues that a significant feature of community is that it is thought by the individuals involved to be a *natural* unity. Nevertheless, the question remains: what characterises this togetherness, and how is the sense of a 'natural' community created and maintained?

In *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, Anthony Cohen (1985) argues that rather than attempting to structurally define community, the approach should be to "follow Wittgenstein's advice and seek not lexical meaning, but *use*" (Cohen, 1985: 12). This is an important departure from the dominant 'community studies' perspectives, such as those developed in the Chicago school, in which structure of groups, based predominantly on location, became the focus of analysis. Cohen is keen to recognise that structures alone do not create meaning. With this in mind, and although it is difficult, if not unhelpful, to

describe exactly what characterises a community, he does give a tentative definition of the word. The members of a community, if it is to be defined as such, should firstly feel that they have something in common with each other; and secondly, this should make them significantly different to other groups. On an initial viewing, this does appear to be a rather obvious assumption to make, but the salient point in Cohen's analysis is that the fundamental ground upon which community is created is in its 'boundaries'. The perception of the boundary is consequently important in maintaining the community. Cohen perceives community in itself as being part of a complex set of relations of symbols.

Cohen begins his argument by presenting a critique of previous work in community, listing several points of contention. He suggests that any idea of simplifying 'community' is in error, as clearly communities are more complex in their actuality. This criticism would fall on deaf ears of course, as Tönnies and subsequent writers in this tradition – including Durkheim and Weber – were dealing with ideals in their typologies. The second point that Cohen makes is that the community studies tradition that emerged out of the work of the 'Chicago school' repeatedly suggests that communities are egalitarian. This clearly is not the case, and Cohen wishes to see a distinction between the understanding of a community that desires equity, one in which the members *feel* they are all equal and one where its members *behave* as if equal. Finally, he argues that any suggestion that members will inevitably conform to group norms is false, stating that "conformity is thus often an illusion; at the very least, it is only part of the story" (Cohen, 1985:37).

Prior to the publication of Cohen's text, other authors were already attempting to understand community as substantially more complex than previously suggested, arguing that the best way to see actual 'communities' as objects of study, is to break them down into several further typologies. Gusfield (1975) endeavours to do this by briefly examining usages of the term and suggesting that they fall into three broad types. The first of these, community as denoting 'public interest' issues, defines well the sort of political literature that I referred to at the very beginning of this chapter, such as community welfare or neighbourhood watch schemes. The second, an example of which is a 'community of scholars', suggests a group of people with common interests, but importantly, with a "special closeness or bond which unites some persons and differentiates them from others" (Gusfield, 1975:xiii). Evidently, this is in agreement with the ideas of 'friendship' and interdependence given by Tönnies, and also suffers from the same problems of demonstrating these ties objectively. The third type of use of

community given by Gusfield relates to a kind of human relationship and not to a particular group of people. This third usage is important as contrary to Cohen's (1985) suggestion about the symbolisation of boundaries – community in this sense could arguably exist without boundaries. It is seemingly merely a 'feeling' between people. Gusfield clarifies his argument by stating that community is either territorial, or relational. The first one defines community according to location, a conception obviously attractive to the community studies tradition, as it allows for the study of a tangible object. In this respect the latter definition creates more difficulties, as the focus of attention must shift to the ways in which members of a group interact with each other, rather than the interaction of clearly bounded groups. It is possible therefore to see how Cohen's definition presents a radical departure from earlier traditions, and how it is connected with earlier theories. Even Cohen does not fully depart from the position that location or geography is significant. Many of the examples he gives, for instance, resemble anthropological analyses of groups that are in some way or another attached to location. This is not to suggest that geography should not be considered. Tangible boundaries such as location, language, and economic position are undoubtedly significant. In fact the debate over the significance of location has a long-standing tradition in community theory. Parsons (1960) for example expresses this in his tentative definition of community as being

[t]hat aspect of the structure of social systems which is referable to the territorial locations of persons (i.e., human individuals as organisms) and their activities.

When I say 'referable to' I do not mean determined exclusively or predominantly by, but rather observable and analysable with reference to location as a focus of attention. (Parsons, 1960:250)

Even in the 1960s it was apparent that, although the core understanding of a community might be via a region or locale, it need not necessarily be restricted to it, and its members in practice might be using different resources in which to define their positions. To limit oneself strictly to an interpretation of community as location-based at the outset would be an error.

Cohen's project is to avoid the structural determinism of the classical tradition by examining the symbolic nature of in-group relationships. In the course of the development of social relationships in a group, if we are to take his proposals for a new understanding of community as accurate, a boundary is created between the group and

other groups accomplished by the use of symbols. He is quick to point out that the sharing of a symbol does not mean that the members also share the same meaning. The key point is that symbols are flexible in their meaning: members may 'believe' that they share the same meaning, or rather they do not question this assumption in their use. The rest of *The Symbolic Construction of Community* is an elaboration of these arguments, via the use of multiple case studies, until finally 'community' can be understood as a malleable and symbolised home in which personal identities are housed:

Whilst 'community' might not have the structure or direction which we associate with social movements, it may nevertheless serve a similar need. It is a largely mental construct, whose 'objective' manifestations in locality or ethnicity give it credibility. It is highly symbolized, with the consequence that its members can invest it with their selves. (Cohen, 1985: 108-109)

Thus, Cohen presents us with a model in which community can incorporate individualism, thereby adding to the debate over whether Community and contemporary 'individualised' Society can co-exist. He exposes 'ritual' as one method by which boundaries are constructed. This can be as varied as a complicated religious ceremony, or simply the terminology used by members and their mode of address. Members of a community may thereby develop a tacit understanding of their group by using the symbols, such as appearance or ritual, to develop a shared boundary of their group and others. Cohen's theory can consequently be seen to have apparent links to Goffman's (1967) studies of interaction rituals and similar approaches, although he does not state this explicitly.

If communities are defined via a collection of symbols, would it therefore be possible to catalogue a list of common 'traits' and thereby define the limits of a group? Can community be understood as a collection of similarities of symbol? Community is surely more than a display of appearances; the term carries more weight than this. It conjures up notions of shared history, of a shared *memory*. Halbwachs (1992) provides some useful insight in his 1952 book, *On Collective Memory* (*La topographie légendaire des évangiles en terre sainte: Etude de mémoire collective*). Suggesting that memory is socially constructed rather than a purely individual concern, Halbwachs states as follows:

[Memories] are part of a totality of thoughts common to a group, the group of people with whom we have a relation at this moment, or with whom we have had a

relation on the preceding day or days. To recall them it is hence sufficient that we place ourselves in the perspective of this group, that we adopt its interests and follow the slant of its reflections (Halbwachs, 1992:52)

The association of memory with group and adoption of group interests provides access to the notion of community as a collective ‘group mind’ (McDougall, 1920). Clearly members of a group will have some things in common, whether it be similar ‘beliefs’ or appearance, but it is the manner in which these are negotiated that is significant to the sociologist. The site of this, if we adopt Cohen’s position, would be the group boundary.

Late modern Community: Michel Maffesoli

Three years after Cohen (1985) had acknowledged the diminishing importance of geography in studies of contemporary community, Michel Maffesoli, a French Sociologist, published *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society* ([1988] 1996). In this work Maffesoli addresses the claim initially posited by the debates of Tönnies and Durkheim, i.e., as modernity progresses, ‘community’ disappears, and argues that there can be seen a revival of communality in contemporary times, only in a different form. Maffesoli’s text can only be understood in the context of his assumption that society is taking on a new post- or late-modern form, a similar stance to other writers of the time such as Lyotard ([1979] 1984).

Although opinions differ widely as to the extent to which contemporary society can be understood as being ‘postmodern’, it is undeniable that a great many changes have taken place in the last 100 years. Primary among these are the huge technological changes that have occurred, bringing new technologies and new communication systems to vast numbers of people. Anthony Giddens (1991, 2001, 2003) has been the strongest proponent of a theory of ‘late modernity’. He expresses the need to understand how changes in society provide people with opportunities for reflexivity, which are then put into action in what he terms as ‘life politics’ (Giddens, 2001). It is interesting to note in the context of this thesis that he suggests an aspect of this new politics can be seen in the ecological movements, whereas he chooses to side-step the issue of new religious movements, stating that they are extremely varied. Late modernity can be defined as

[c]haracterised by widespread scepticism about providential reason, coupled with the recognition that science and technology are double-edged, creating new parameters of risk and danger as well as offering beneficent possibilities for humankind. (Giddens, 2001: 27-28).

We will see that this conception of contemporary times has references to the reflexive scepticism required of modern magicians (Luhmann, 1989). It also suggests that the integration of technology with the narratives of science offers opportunities, which, as Giddens (1991) explains in *Modernity and Self Identity*, extend to individual action. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to suggest that this will affect conceptions of community, perhaps leading to the development of new ones, as given by Maffesoli. Bernard, in 1973, argued that the traditional understanding of community is, in present times, being eroded to the point where the classical knowledge about the idea is no longer as valid. She suggests that the person at home watching television, “feels closer to the female talk-show star than to her neighbours across the hall” (Bernard, 1973:182). Technology thereby provides a method for an individual to associate with people that he or she would, under other circumstances, be unable to make contact with.

Could it be that, rather than discount the ‘classical’ understanding of community, it is possible to see in the influence of technology a shift from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*? Kenneth Gergen (1991) in *The Saturated Self*, would agree with this, in arguing that the new communication and media technologies substantially transform communities. It is easy to predict that interactions that previously would take place in a physical ‘face-to-face’ setting, will take on a different form when mediated by technologies, such as the internet or other telecommunication devices. However, Gergen’s claim is based upon more than this. His enterprise is to illustrate the division of the Self into “a multiplicity of self-investments” (Gergen, 1991:74), a condition that he terms ‘multiphrenia’. This late modern self can therefore be conceived as ‘distributed’ – constructed by the social world rather than existing independently of it (Stevens, 1996). Hence, for Gergen, community in the postmodern world is dispersed, which subsequently moves “toward the creation of polymorphous perversity in social pattern” (Gergen, 1991:212). This comment in itself reflects the nostalgic manner by which community is presented in the majority of social science texts, as being something positive, beneficial, and desirable – much like that of Tönnies in fact.

It is understandable that all of the theoretical conceptions discussed so far have placed 'community' within a nostalgic framework. One might expect the social theorists of Tönnies and Durkheim's era to have a rather negative view of the transformation from pre-modern to modern society. They lived in a period of tremendous social and economic upheaval and could focus their attention on the direction of history, illustrating that the forms of relation and association of the pre-modern were being replaced by other varieties of structure (Gusfield, 1975). It is easy to see how this period of unrest might evoke a desire for the status quo, or for the safety of 'home'. It is also possible to see that within the present technological transformations, further changes and instabilities produce Gergen's 'polymorphous perversities'. Yet within all these claims a continuing nostalgia for traditional community remains, mirroring that of the classical sociologists of nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Zigmunt Bauman takes this form of nostalgia as the foundation of his analysis of contemporary community, summarised by his statement that, "Community is nowadays another name for paradise lost – but one to which we dearly hope to return, and so we feverishly seek the roads that may bring us there" (Bauman, 2001: 3).

In the ever-expanding technological world where a dispersal of individual investments is taking place, it is difficult to see how geographical area can lose importance as readily as some have said (e.g. Gergen, 1991; Turkle, 1995). Bernard argues that even within these changes, locale continues to persist. Individuals are still tied to a place of living and working, and so, like Parsons' (1960) definition, 'community' is still referable to the locations of persons. That this locale remains a powerful influence on community suggests a downplaying of the roles that technology takes. It argues that although telecommunications, transportation, and other technologies may be transforming the way in which we live our daily lives, we continue to base our symbolic construction of community on the places where we work or live. If this is the case, it implies that a collection of people who do not live in the same area, or who do not work together, cannot be understood as forming a community. This will undoubtedly create difficulties when examining those groups who do not, on initial description, seem to be based in a locale, such as internet-based groups. Can a collection of people communicating from different areas, perhaps even in different time-zones, be understood to be a community? Perhaps 'locale' can take on a different role, or a different meaning?

Maffesoli (1996) suggests that the multiplicity of the self can serve as an arena in which ‘community’ is built. His premise is that the previous era, characterised by rationality and individuation, has been replaced by the present, late modern one that he terms the “empathetic period” (Maffesoli, 1996:11). In this period, in contrast to increased differentiation, there is a lack of distinction between individuals, generating a “loss in a collective subject: in other words, what I shall call neo-tribalism” (Maffesoli, 1996:11). It is suggested in his book that the transformation now occurring is for a ‘sociality’ to replace the ‘social’. He argues that individuals in contemporary society make their life decisions less by the use of reason, and that it is the exchange of feelings and ‘chit-chat’ that is now the salient aspect to social group formation. This emphasises the importance of everyday interactions, whether they be in the office at a place of work, in the home, or in other environments. Obviously, it opens up the area of study focussing on much more intimate interactions, a move away from the large-scale classical notions of community as being founded on geographical location or apparent similarities between persons. Maffesoli’s use of the term ‘sociality’ is quite obscure, and demands further investigation. He suggests that a new way of understanding social groups is necessary, and adopts Weber’s term *Gemeinde* – “emotional community”. This, like the classical understandings given earlier in this chapter, is an ideal type and is not presumed to have ever existed in totality, but nevertheless, it is used to explain the emotional desire to find fulfilment via relationships. The fundamental essence of his argument is that individuals in postmodern society are members of emotional communities, which are changeable and have a lack of routinisation. The influence of Weber on this thinking cannot be underestimated, and we can even suggest that Maffesoli, rather than being in opposition to conceptions of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, is actually a useful extension of this focus of thought, in that it expresses Tönnies’ firm belief that the two categories are inseparable. *Gemeinschaft* resides within *Gesellschaft* – Maffesoli points out that Weber himself suggested that emotional communities and rigid organisations exist alongside each other. In *Time of the Tribes*, he perceives the ‘social’ as being rational strategies, leading to structures and organisations with a finality, but posits that ‘sociality’ refers to the unstable, chaotic creativity of the small groupings. Sociality can perceivably be understood as the late modern expression of *Gemeinschaft*.

We therefore arrive back at the early sociological explanation, but now using the broad perspectives given about social groups to arrive at a more detailed analysis of what it is that may characterise community in contemporary times. Both Tönnies and Maffesoli

strive for the aspect of community that expresses its imperceptibility. For Tönnies, the underlying aspect that defined a community as opposed to a rationalised organisational structure was 'friendship'. Maffesoli, from a similar abstract perspective, has taken a more complex notion of 'sociality', founded upon what he terms *puissance*. At the heart of Maffesoli's analysis is the idea that *puissance* drives individuals. It is a "will to live" (Maffesoli, 1996:20) within the social body, which is prevalent in the current fascination with 'new age' medicine. Community (and the sociality that forms it) is an aspect of the greater influence of *puissance*, and the groups that form in contemporary times will be located within this force. Maffesoli states that

My hypothesis, as distinct from those who lament the end of great collective values and the withdrawal into the self – which they falsely parallel with the growing importance of everyday life – is that a new (and evolving) trend can be found in the growth of small groups and existential networks. This represents a sort of tribalism which is based at the same time on the spirit of religion (*re-ligare*) and on localism (proxemics, nature). (Maffesoli, 1996:40)

This hypothesis is useful when assessing the possibility of a new form of late-modern community because of several key points. Principally, the use of the term 'existential network' presents us with an object of study that would presumably have observable characteristics that make it 'existential'. Groups in contemporary times are, as suggested above, less bound by reasoning, and form more around the existential efficacy provided via *puissance*. If this is the case, one would expect to see emotional networks emerging as discernible communities. This is arguably the case in many areas of society; in therapy groups for example, and particularly within the religious fields, in which their heart is a re-enchantment with divinity. The quotation above notes the importance of religion in this equation, although the religion of Maffesoli has more in common with Bauman's (1990) 'spiritual unity' than with the strictly structured religious institutions studied by Weber or Durkheim. Religion is not understood as an organisational arrangement that binds because of an external force, but instead is perceived to be an 'internal' (meaning focussing upon that which is in close proximity) consequence of what Simmel (cited in Maffesoli, 1996) suggests is a 'sentimental attachment to nature' and a 'fascination with power'. The secularisation debate, with its continuing presence in the sociology of religion, must attempt to understand this current upsurge in neo-paganism and the new age (Cunningham, 1999).

The second section of the quotation provides us with further understanding of the new types of community that may emerge in late-modern times. A growth in environmental-based pressure groups or groups with an environmentalist ideology provides evidence for Maffesoli's claims. Yet he gives as the basis for this localism and religious spirit, something that may pose difficulties when examining certain forms of contemporary groupings. It is evident that locale continues to pervade social theory even in 'postmodern' theory. Frazer (in King and Stoker 1996) suggests that although locality does not necessarily have to characterise a community, it nevertheless holds substantial rhetorical power. She claims that, with the recent move towards political regionalism, the communitarian literature is holding locality as a strong feature of community, even to the extent that "there are more or less clear hints, then, that communitarianism flows into localism" (Frazer, 1996:96). Obviously the notion of community cannot be understood solely from a basically political standpoint as given by the communitarians, but this perspective is not unique. As we have seen, community is consistently being understood in a framework of locality. Cohen (1985) defines boundary as being either geographical or purely symbolic, but recognises the importance of locale in the rituals that go towards maintaining those boundaries. Maffesoli (1996) emphasises the significance of 'proxemics' in strengthening and defining a community, noting that "sociality of proxemics is thus constituted of a constant sedimentation which lays down a path; which builds 'territory'". The territory is of course to be understood as relational, or bound by location, but proxemics denotes a certain locale, whether it is work or home, as already discussed. Essentially, Maffesoli uses the term 'proxemics' to refer to the 'nearness' of contemporary communities (or 'tribes'). His theory is that *puissance* leads to a 'natural' sociality that generates the formation of groups 'from below'. We can suggest therefore that proxemics is the form that contemporary *Gemeinschaft* takes.

Despite his suggestion of the 'naturalness' of this process, proxemics and the building of territory undoubtedly demands a certain level of involvement in the group. Etzioni, in his earlier incarnation as a Sociologist, explored this area, stating that

[o]rganisations must continually recruit means if they are to realise their goals. One of the most important of these is the positive orientation of the participants to the organisational power [...] The intensity of involvement ranges from high to low.

The direction is either positive or negative. We refer to positive involvement as *commitment* and to negative involvement as *alienation*. (Etzioni, 1975:9)

Etzioni's observations are applicable to much of what has been explored in this chapter. In the case of a perceived late-modern community or *tribus* outlined here, alienation is not a condition of removal from the material processes of production. It may still prove to be useful if it perceived as alienation from the sources of cultural production within a group. In order to be part of a community, however it is defined by the sociologist, it is necessary to have some sort of involvement and a level of commitment. This commitment must be understood as being emotional in nature and therefore will demand a "significant expenditure of human resources" (Scherer, 1972:84). Perhaps this explains why the postmodern tribes of Maffesoli and the groups examined in this thesis are so nebulous, forming and disbanding in what can sometimes be a matter of months.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined some of the substantive ways in which 'community' has been theorised in sociological literature. In doing so, it has presented the three themes that will be played out in detail in the thesis to follow. The first of these is the perceived 'naturalness' of community, as expressed by concepts of *Gemeinschaft* and 'sociality'. Secondly, the theory that community must be understood as a set of symbolic relations, defined significantly on a boundary, has been suggested. Finally, a proposition has been given that characterises community in late modernity as being significantly different to the perceptions of early classical theorists. This is the case particularly in its emphasis on small groupings over large ideal types – described in the terms of Maffesoli's 'tribes' – but also in the suggestion that in order to 'belong' to late modern community, members must actively seek it.

Chapter Two: Group Structure and Process in Empirical Research

Introduction

The last chapter explored how understandings of community have changed since Ferdinand Tönnies' *Community and Society*. It also introduced some themes that are relevant in studying community in contemporary times, noting that, in late modernity, the propensity is for small groups to form as micro-communities, or 'tribes' in the language of Maffesoli (1996). It is useful, therefore, to present a brief exploration of work that has approached specifically the notion of 'groups' and that informs some of the analysis in this thesis. The study of groups has been a key element in the development and expansion of the social sciences, particularly in Social Psychology, forming, for example, part of William James' psychological theory published in 1890 (Wozniak, 1999) and Festinger's (1957) theory of Cognitive Dissonance. As varied as these studies are, all of them referred to indeed require a perception and understanding of what constitutes a 'group'. The structure of this chapter, like the last, takes the form of an essentially historical examination of the approach taken by social psychology towards group processes. It begins with a brief exploration of the development of this field, citing studies that have had significant impact on the theory. Then an exploration of the main areas of study is presented, again giving brief examples from the literature. Finally, some issues of the social psychology of group dynamics in the context of late modern community are investigated.

Group Analysis in Context

The study of groups was a significant component of early writings on society, prior to the establishment of the 'human sciences' as understood today. It was in the 1930s, however, that research proper into group processes and 'group dynamics' formed into a relatively coherent and identifiable area of study (Cartwright and Zander, 1960). As seen in the previous chapter in the discussion on Tönnies, the context within which theory arises is significant. In the case of research into group dynamics, its development is inseparable from the historical context of post-First World War America. Arguably, the direction of

the field's progression would have been different had the main organisations utilising group dynamics theory not been located within the Northern United States and north-western Europe. Seemingly, there are two strands to the development of group dynamics research. In the first case, the inter-war years were a time of growing study into the incorporation of immigrants into America. Social work and research into street gangs such as those conducted by the Chicago school formed an aspect of what was to develop into group dynamics theory. Fundamentally, social research such as this was conducted in conjunction with support given by the Federal Government, laying the foundations for further exploration. An effect of World War One intelligence strategies in the US had been the prompting of an examination into human aptitude and ability (Cartwright and Zander, 1960). The years following the war saw massive industrialisation, and significantly, the expansion of mass production (Cohen and Kennedy, 2000). Therefore, it is clear that in these conditions of developing Western Capitalism an understanding of how to better one's own production capacity via an effective strategy of management could lead to a desire for the study of group processes. This is in effect what happened, pursuing further the "scientific management" of Frederick Taylor (1911) into studies of effective leadership and attainment of group goals. This is an argument given by Cartwright and Zander (1960), who suggest that the study of groups and group processes were partly motivated by business interests and furthered by links between professionals and research institutes. They propose that the development of the group dynamics approach needed a 'supportive society', by which they mean the growth of management theory and a foundation in the social sciences.

It must be noted that the development of Social Psychology as a discipline, attempting to find a location for itself at the time, was ingrained in the debate between overarching 'scientism' and non-empirical theorising. The move was subsequently towards experimental testing and statistical modelling which gave rise to the principal early studies of group dynamics in the 1940s and 1950s. Quantitative data held more standing than the qualitative approaches given by anthropologists and some sociologists of the time. Since then, however, the methodology and techniques of research have incorporated broader non-experimental approaches, in line with the rest of the social sciences. This has encompassed, for example, Goffman's (1959) writings on teams and the ethnomethodology of Garfinkel (1967).

In the following sections, several substantive areas of research and theory within the literature of group process research shall be examined.

Defining Groups

A brief examination of a selection of Social Psychology texts presents one of the difficulties of group analysis, namely, developing a coherent definition of what in fact constitutes a ‘group’. Apparently, a group can vary from a small family, to a large ethnic category, including everything in-between. Brown (2000) offers the following definition:

[A] great many groups can be characterised as a collection of people bound together by some common experience or purpose, or who are interrelated in a micro-social structure, or who interact with one another. (Brown, 2000: 4)

This does not in itself seem very helpful; it certainly seems that we could apply the definition to a great many contexts. What, for example, constitutes an interrelation in micro-social structure? Certainly, many people will have similar experiences, but many ‘groups’ categorised in this way will be, in the main, difficult to use in effective qualitative analysis. People interact with other individuals everyday, but this by no means automatically makes them a group. Brown remedies this by adding that, “those same people share some conception of themselves as belonging to the same social unit” (Brown, 2000:4). Here, we have a more complex understanding. The group is transformed from what we may state is an etic conception to one that is provided by the members of such groups themselves. Nevertheless, this definition does not suggest that individual members of such groups actually need face-to-face contact or communication, as seen by Brown’s initial emphasis on common experience.

The importance of groups that are not based on collective interaction will be discussed later in relation to categorisation theory. Here it is useful to see other ways in which the ‘group’ has been defined in Social research. In 1909 Charles Henry Cooley made a distinction between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ groups. They have very different characteristics, not only because of their differences in structure, but because the former particularly is thought to have greater influence upon the ‘social nature’ of individuals. Cooley suggests that the primary group “is a certain fusion of individualities in a common whole” (Cooley, 1909 [online]). This type of group is far removed in its idea from the

larger groups that much of Sociology discusses. It can of course be argued that class, gender and ethnicity are far greater contributors to the social ‘nature’ of a person, but the effects of small group memberships are undeniably powerful. These include the family as well as cliques, clubs, gangs, work groups – all areas where individuals are likely to have communication with the other members directly. The relationships within these types of primary groups form the basis of our daily social life. As Homans (1950) suggests, this type of group, being primary, “is the commonest, as it is the most familiar, of social units” (Homans, 1950: 2). The following discussion about groups will focus principally upon the primary group, with reference made to larger groups when necessary to clarify a theory or perspective.

Cohesion

What is it that makes a group? For a collection of individuals to become a group there must be some set or sets of processes in place that generate the ‘groupness’, bonding the people together and enabling its continuation. This is one of the central questions that a study of groups strives to address, as it forms the hub upon which the other fields of analysis rest. Initially Social Psychology has had the problem of defining a method by which group cohesiveness could be tested. Once a definition of cohesiveness is presented then it should be possible to explore the processes that help to hold a group together. One example of this is the study of leadership conducted by Whyte and Lippitt (1960) in which they measured the use of the pronoun ‘I’ over the pronoun ‘we’ in different group structures. In effect this study was attempting to address the extent to which a sense of belonging to the group was internalised, and expressed by the participants.

It was not until 1950, however, that cohesiveness was formally defined, by Festinger (1950) in his study of ‘informal social communication’. He states that cohesiveness is

the resultant of all the forces acting on the members to remain in the group. These forces may depend on the attractiveness or unattractiveness of either the prestige of the group, members in the group, or the activities in which the group engages.
(Festinger, 1950: 273)

This definition is subsequently used in the text to demonstrate – via experimental study – the effects of group cohesion. This includes, for example, the tested hypothesis that if an

individual wishes to remain a member of the group, that group has influence over them. Group ‘cohesiveness’ is based upon a concept of ‘attractiveness’. This in itself is ridden with difficulties of definition, but a great deal of research has been done on this area of interpersonal relations¹, and this can be applied to group situations. Yet, as Hogg (1995) argues, in later studies, the working definition of cohesiveness is simplified in order to make them more practically operational. He goes on to suggest that social psychologists have never fully resolved the practical problem of how to use a concept of cohesiveness in broad experimental studies, and consequently have developed more specialised scales in smaller fields of research such as sports psychology.

Despite the difficulties of utilising a concept of group cohesiveness, it is nonetheless an essential component of research into group processes. Hogg (1992) has suggested that a more useful perspective is to delineate between ‘personal’ attraction and ‘social’ attraction. The latter, it is argued, encompasses a larger collection of forces that are unique to groups. If we take this as the basis for group cohesiveness, the literature provides us with expected emanations of cohesive group behaviour. The key concept to be explored here is the ‘social norm’ (Sherif, [1936]1966). The notion of normative behaviour has been utilised since the early studies of Durkheim into the nature of society, and later Parsons (1951) and his discussion of the social system. In the study of groups the norm can be understood to be either the explicit ‘rules’ of being a member, such as dress code, or more subtle implicit expectations of behaviour. These norms can influence individuals even when others are not present (Atkinson et al, 1990), but within the group setting it is expected that there will be convergence towards consensus – the ‘middle ground’ of the group. Sheriff ([1936]1966) illustrates this experimentally with his autokinetic experiment. This experiment was based on individuals measuring the perceived movement of a point of light in a darkened room, yet the movement was in actuality created by the eye-movement of the participants. The participants who did the experiment in groups were found to use the other’s estimates in making their own. They were subsequently found to use this estimate even when doing the later experiments alone, demonstrating the influence that a group can have on an individual. Social norms are therefore one indicator of group cohesiveness, as they hold influence over the members. This will be explored further below.

¹ The social psychology of attractiveness is well established. Festinger (1950) mentioned the importance of proximity. Other factors included in analysis may be availability, reciprocity and similarity (Hogg, 1995).

The conformity towards norms is a general observation, but there are more specific displays of group cohesiveness and solidarity that can be explored within a group. For example, in a strongly cohesive group, it would be expected that a high degree of ethnocentrism would exist. Ethnocentrism, defined by Sumner in 1906, is understood as

a differentiation [...] between ourselves, the we-group, or in-group, and everybody else, or the others-groups, out-groups. [...] Ethnocentrism is the technical name for this view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it. (Sumner, cited in Brewer and Miller, 1996:23)

It is possible to see ethnocentrism as being not only a useful indicator of cohesiveness, but one of the most fundamental processes involved in defining a group to its members. The in-group preference and loyalty present in ethnocentric behaviour may define the boundaries of the group. It is argued that a polarisation of attitudes and beliefs will occur within members of groups, so that positions on political or social issues become more strongly defined in accordance with that of the group (Isenberg, 1986). Evidently, in-group membership is an important factor affecting social norms and the perception of out-group members. An example of this can be seen in the studies on stereotyping (Turner and Giles, 1981), and in particular that of self-categorisation theory which will be discussed later.

Influence

As Festinger (1950) demonstrates, when group cohesiveness is in place, the group holds influence over its members. In fact, as has been suggested, this may be one of the most evident expressions of the 'groupness' of the group. Conformity of members can be explained in a number of ways, and again, it is social norms that become a key element in the literature. Perhaps the most famous experimental study of this is Solomon Asch's (1960) 'line-length' investigation, in which subjects were required to judge which of three vertical lines was the same length as a standard one. In this experiment, participants were seated in a group, yet in actuality only one of them was being studied, as the rest of the group had been briefed to choose the wrong line exactly one third of the time. The experiment shows that an individual can be swayed towards the majority view. In Asch's own words, the purpose of the research is:

to study the social and personal conditions that induce individuals to resist or to yield to group pressures when the latter are perceived to be *contrary to fact* (Asch, 1960: 1989, italics in original).

Brown (2000), following Festinger, has suggested that a distinction can be made between this experiment and the autokinetic experiment conducted by Sherif (1966). He points out that the subjects in the line-length experiment changed only their behaviour, whereas those in Sherif's study changed their cognitive perception, as they were 'influenced' even when taking the experiment alone. The distinction is made therefore between public behaviour and private, internal change.

In the context of the social influence of group-membership, social norms, including attitudinal norms, can therefore be seen to influence individual members. This aspect was studied by Newcomb (1943) in his study of the students at Bennington College in the late 1930s. This piece of research uses attitude measurement and sociometric testing to plot the political attitudes of the students on joining the college and in their higher years. Newcomb finds that the newcomers have conservative political 'culture' – due to their previous backgrounds – but that this changes to the predominant liberal attitude of the campus culture and senior students. Two things are significant here. Firstly, that the approach taken is non-experimental. Although not qualitative, the data gathered is nonetheless taken from a 'natural' field. This therefore allows for greater validity of the findings in applying to the world outside of the laboratory. Secondly, Newcomb demonstrates how a group rewards its members for conforming to approved attitudes. If members adopt the same dominant attitude of the group, they are seen to be better associated with it, and therefore more 'worthy' of representing the group, in this case the college. The group therefore encompasses processes of reward and approval. Convergence of social norms can subsequently be seen to be less egalitarian and more a process of social influence of dominant attitudes.

A final example of group influence can be seen in the study by Whyte (1955 [1937]) entitled *Street Corner Society*. This study is significant in many respects, not least because it is an early ethnographic piece of research that was produced in the years when the group dynamics field was developing. Essentially, it is a document of the structure and functioning of a group, the Norton Street Gang. Within the book, Whyte explores

several processes, including how the social norms of the gang serve to create cohesiveness and how these influence the members. An example can be found in the types of behaviour that the gang values, in common with Newcomb's research mentioned above, although in the gang's case these attributes are defined as such things as 'toughness' or athletic ability (Whyte, 1955). One of the most valuable aspects of this study, related entirely to the qualitative methodology followed, is that Whyte is able to illustrate the complexity of group behaviour in a 'natural' setting. The gang literally is 'dynamic', with reward and influence a far more complicated process than is suggested by a brief examination of the results of Newcomb's sociometric tests. In particular, Whyte demonstrates how influence works in a network of individuals, focussed around status and consequently, leadership.

Leadership and Status

Conformity, as explored above, is one aspect of group dynamics that can be conceived of as an indicator of group cohesiveness. It is possible to see this cohesiveness as being a product of an abstract set of social norms that are in a sense 'out there' – simply residing somewhere within the fabric of the group, influencing members, but nowhere to be seen. Whyte's study of the Norton Street Gang illustrates that the opposite is true. According to this, social norms – the behaviour and attitudes of a group – find their influence through the communication of individual members, and their adoption can only be seen to be an inevitable consequence of membership to a certain extent. Subsequently, in the years since *Street Corner Society*, Social Psychology has given a great deal of emphasis into this process of status and leadership.

The basic finding of these studies is that individual members of groups do not have the same status as one another. Groups are not egalitarian, even if they are established with that aim in mind. Within a group, different expectations surround different members with different roles. It is suggested by Hogg (1995) that 'norms' apply to the group as a whole, but different roles apply to subgroups. These are prescriptions of behaviour that are attached to different members. Hogg continues to give three distinct reasons for the emergence of roles, given below:

1. They represent a division of labour in the group – only in the most simple groups is there no division of labour.
2. They furnish clear-cut social expectations within the group, and information

about how members relate to one another.

3. They furnish members with a self-definition and place within the group.

Clearly roles emerge to facilitate group functioning. (Hogg, 1995: 243).

The striking functionalist approach aside, these three points are a clear summary of the conclusions of the numerous studies. For example, Slater (1955), using the Interaction Process Analysis (IPA) developed by Bales, discovered that the member of a group likely to be regarded by other members as most influential was not necessarily the member most liked by them. Slater suggests that his conclusions point to two basic roles in problem-solving groups. These are the task specialist, and the socio-emotional specialist. The former would devote more time towards solving the problem, while the latter would often be the one more liked by the members (Brown, 2000). This approach has been applied to several different forms of group, although whether extending it in this way produces valid conclusions is called into question by an analysis of its application to the family by Parsons and Bales (1956), as argued by Brown (2000). The difficulty lies in the fact that Parsons and Bales' theory suggest that the different specialists are incompatible, although Slater's original research does not argue this. Clearly, although differentiation of roles occurs within groups, these may not necessarily be exclusive.

Despite the fact that Slater's (1955) research is focused on problem-solving groups, it is possible to see the second and third reasons for the emergence of roles given by Hogg above, in the well-known experiment conducted by Phillip Zimbardo (2002). In this experiment that studied the behaviour of students given roles in a simulated prison (and that had to be dramatically stopped short of its full term), a clearly defined division of labour was constructed. With this, a clear set of self-definitions emerged, used by the students in their respective roles to act them out to the full. It appears that when groups exist, or are constructed with a specific organisational task, Hogg's (1995) three points about the development of roles ring true. The question must be asked therefore: what is the case in groups which *do not* have an explicitly defined organisation at the outset?

The conclusions given by Whyte (1955), in *Street Corner Society*, suggest several things about roles in groups. His research illustrates the complexities of status within roles, and in particular, allows something to be said of leadership. In discussing the leader of one of the gangs in cornerville, Whyte suggests that he is the one that best displays the behaviour that the group values most. For example, if the group values boxing, then the leader must

be competent at it (Homans, 1950). The difference between this and that of Slater (1955) is that in the latter, a reasonably clear task is in place and outlined explicitly, but in the case of a street gang, this is not necessarily the case. Further to this, it is suggested that the leader not only lives up to the expectations, but promotes those qualities in which they excel. This, of course, creates an added pressure of demand upon them. Homans (1950) in summarising this, suggests that within the politics of the street corner society

It follows that the leader always gives more in money and favours to his followers than he ever receives from them, and that he is enabled to do so just because he is a leader. He has a patronage to dispense. He pays them in money; they repay him in the coin of accepted leadership. (Homans, 1950: 170)

The leader can therefore be expected to hold a position central to the communication of the group, and indeed, if not present, the cohesiveness of the group may be seriously disrupted to the extent of breaking down. Lippitt and White (1960) examine the behaviour of adult leaders in children's clubs that are trained in three different types of leadership practice, in an attempt to explore the reactions of the members of the groups. These leadership treatments are described as 'authoritarian', 'democratic' and 'laissez-faire', and are alternated after six weeks of meetings. In constructing these leadership types, Lippitt and Whyte suggest that in the first approach all policy is determined by the leader, in the second group discussion should decide, and in the third, the group have complete freedom. In the course of their research, although not originally a primary concern, they discovered much about the behaviour of leaders in group situations. Principally, they found that each of the leaders became "more like the others in the same role than he was like himself from one role to another" (Lippitt and Whyte, 1960: 538). Not inconsequentially, therefore, they demonstrate how roles, when adopted by individuals, significantly change behaviour towards other members.

Another notable conclusion to emerge from this experiment is that in 'democracy' there is "more group-mindedness and more friendliness" (Lippitt and Whyte, 1960:546). They observed that the use of the pronoun 'I' was used less frequently than 'we' and that more 'group-minded' remarks were used, suggesting behaviour for the group as a whole rather than as an individual. In fact the conclusions as a whole suggest that democracy is more efficient, produces less aggression, involves less play (and consequently more work) and is preferred by the boys in the experiment. This research is an example of the growing

trend for exploratory study into ‘efficiency’ in group work that was occurring in the late 1950s in the United States. Consequently, the conclusions, and the experimental methodology used to generate the categories of leadership styles, should be seen in this – particularly political – context. This was an influential step in the development of research into group dynamics and continues now in the form of management research.

Task-effectiveness

The approach taken by Lippitt and Whyte (1960) briefly explored above, was part of a trend of leadership research that in the 1950s produced one of the most cited concepts in managerial literature: Bales’ (1951) IPA system noted above, which produced the categorisation of ‘task’ and ‘socio-emotional’ leaders. Brown (2000) points out that these two categories are similar to the autocratic and democratic styles of Lippitt and Whyte, as the concept of whether behaviour is task-directed or not is present in both studies.

These two studies focus on the explicit behaviour towards a task, but in some cases of group behaviour it is as though the leader has a ‘magical’ ability to successfully lead a group. The theory of charismatic leadership has been developed, studying less of the personality traits of an individual, and more of the relationship between leaders and other members (Brown, 2000). Yet the research in this area, as Brown (2000) suggests, has not to date been clear about what exactly contributes to charismatic leadership. Nevertheless, it does appear that a charismatic leader is someone who is able to express the ‘essence’ of the group, at least in the eyes of the other members. Fiedler (1978) explores a similar idea when he concludes that leadership in groups is a contingent process of matching the style of leadership with that required in the situation. He puts forward three components, one of which is ‘power’, suggesting that leaders have the power to reward other members, but that this may be greater or lesser depending on the attitude of those members towards that leader. In this contingency theory, the amount of control that a leader has is strongly related to the effectiveness of their leadership. Yet how is it possible to simultaneously have the power to change the group, yet at the same time embody its norms? Hollander (1958) suggests that this is done by building up ‘credit’ with the rest of the group by doing such things as displaying competence within the group objectives. Evidently, social psychological studies of leadership, whether experimental or ‘naturalistic’, must still hold the question of group commitment and cohesiveness firmly in mind.

Hawthorne Studies

Group structure and behaviour could be understood in a rather simplistic ‘leader’ and ‘follower’ manner, but as the work of Hollander mentioned above demonstrates, in practice groups rarely conform to this pattern. Not only does the leader have to modify and control his action in order to gain legitimacy as a person of high status within the group, but the behaviour of *all* the members combines to produce certain effects. Observations of this nature can be seen in the early psychological and management literature, but nowhere more clearly than in the research known as the ‘Hawthorne Studies’ conducted in the late 1920s and early ‘30s in Chicago. These were experimental studies designed to observe the behaviour of workers in different working environments and times and relate it to their productivity. These studies are important to examine, not only because they present some of the first research into this area, but also because, while a primary concern may have been productivity of workers, several other observations about group behaviour are documented.

The experiments of most relevance here took place in a room set-aside in the Western Electric Company, termed the Bank Wiring Observation Room. This was in an attempt to create an observational setting without placing the participants in conditions abnormal to their ‘normal’ working environment. The well-known ‘hawthorne effect’ (Giddens, 2001) emerged from the earlier experiments in this series, in which the researchers discovered that productivity rose regardless of the conditions the participants were placed under. It would be tempting to discount this research due to this initial finding, but the later observations are interesting despite this earlier experimental ‘error’. Primary among these is the beginning of an understanding of the complexities of group work. Productivity, in the context of the workers at the Western Electric Company, is related not only to environment, but also to the intragroup behaviour that occurs amongst the workers. For example, it is suggested that the potential to produce more output, particularly in the afternoons, was higher than the actual output due to the influence of conversations and ‘games’. This observation is in addition to the finding that workers would alter their records in order to assure earnings. This is more evidence for the difficulties of studying group behaviour in ‘unnatural’ settings.

The understanding of group cohesiveness described previously can suggest a singular, homogenous collective – this or a ‘non-group’ – yet these early Hawthorne studies present

something quite different. The researchers discovered the emergence of two cliques within the working group in the observation room, nicknamed “the group in front” and “the group at the back” (Homans, 1960: 70). These two cliques were evident by their inter-group behaviour and observable differences in the actions of members of each group. They noted for example, that the first clique felt their activities were superior to the second, with one member suggesting that in contrast to the other group, “we talk about things of some importance” (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939: 510). In addition, controversies were far less frequent in this group - for example about whether the room’s window should be open or shut. The observations ranged from noting the differing amounts and price of confectionery bought and the differences in the ‘games’ that were enacted, more of which is discussed below. Clearly, this commentary can be seen as displaying the basic distinction between in-group and out-group member preference in ethnocentric behaviour. In this case however, the most interesting aspect is in the clearly observable behaviour that distinguishes the boundary between one group and another, and that may include actions that are not based on apparent ‘conflict’.

The Hawthorne studies produced valuable data on the nature of intra-group social behaviour in the context of a work environment, but can this be extended this to other settings? It is possible to assess this by examining one set of observations to emerge from the research: the ‘games’ played by the members of the two groups. These games include betting on whether coins would match when thrown, playing card games and pooled bets on various spectator sports. The significant element here is that although these games took place occasionally during work, they usually they occurred during lunch breaks. We could suggest two conclusions from this. Firstly that the context although ostensibly still in a work environment, is in actuality a leisure setting. Secondly, even if this claim were rejected, there are undoubtedly many other non-work settings where informal ‘games’ may occur. These games might not be structured in the same way as above², perhaps revolving more around ‘word-play’, particularly as found in computer mediated communication (Ruedenerg et al, 1997), but can be classified in a similar way nonetheless. In the studies, some out-group members were often accused by in-group members of ‘horsing around’ (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939: 468). In essence, these informal social exchanges of play serve to create or break bonds, in this case leading to the two cliques.

²They may be actual games with set rules explicitly understood by the participants. Laurier, et al (2001) examining behaviour in a cafe suggested that one use of the tables is the playing of games.

Conflict

Groups, in developing their own boundaries, will often develop hostility. The individuals of the Bank Wiring Observation Room described above were observed to have formed friendships with selective members and antagonisms with others. These were, on the most part, found to occur between pairs, and notably friendships were usually found within the two groups rather than between them (Homans, 1960). Clearly this is part of the process of defining, or at least working within defined boundaries. Ethnocentric behaviour in this analysis demands of necessity a rejection of other out-group behaviour. This conflict between groups has been explained in the bulk of the literature of social psychology in two ways, based firstly on individual aggression and secondly on the concept of ‘social identity’. Research referred to in this first area is primarily based on large categories, such as race and ethnicity, hence it is at times difficult to see how this relates to more micro-scale interaction between smaller groups. Nevertheless, it should be briefly noted.

The first theory argues that inter-group conflict and prejudice occurs due to frustration, and consequently is known as ‘frustration-aggression’ theory (Brown, 2000). This theory includes the idea of a ‘scapegoat’ which is chosen as the target of prejudice. However, as Brown (2000) notes, *individual* anger is seen as the main cause of collective action and therefore it appears to be difficult to understand this in the context of goal-directed groups. The notion of relative deprivation is an adjunct to this theory and can be used to explain social disorder. Grant and Brown (1995) conducted a study where two groups were told they would be rewarded for their work depending on their assessment by the other group. One group was told that they would receive less than the other, and consequently, strong in-group bias was observed in addition to many derogatory comments about the other group. On a larger scale, some similarity between relative deprivation theory and Merton’s theory of social disorder could be argued.

Social Identity

All of the areas of research into group processes explored so far have, since the latter part of the twentieth century, been influenced and in some cases altered by one concept. This approach to group behaviour and ‘belongingness’ is known as Social Identity Theory, and

it is important to present a brief overview, as it effects the understanding of all of the concepts discussed above.

The theory began in the 1970s and its name was employed by Turner and Brown (1978), encompassing the various descriptions utilised by Tajfel (Turner, 1999). Tajfel had developed the Minimal Group Paradigm, from an experiment where children were assigned to one of two groups and displayed in-group favouritism despite all other variables being constant (Hogg, 1995). This experimental study demonstrates how in-group attitudes emerge, even with no similarity other than being assigned to one group. Further studies have found the same result, and it is suggested that it is via a process of ‘social categorisation’ that this occurs. Essentially, it is argued that when an individual is categorised as being members of a group, they identify with that group category in their psychological behaviour and their commitment to that group (Hogg, 1995). This work on minimal groups therefore lays a strong psychological foundation for the ethnocentrism encountered in the earlier studies, especially as it is argued that when self-categorised, a strong homogenisation of the out-group by the in-group members occurs³.

Social Identity Theory is a continuation of this to wider societies, examining conflict and inter-group behaviour between both large-scale groups and smaller groups, such as clubs and small organisations. The theory argues that social categories such as these provide members with a social identity. Fundamentally, this identity is not only a description of self, but also a prescription of behaviour. The group becomes more than an arena in which individual selves enact action: it actually becomes part of individual’s self-concept. Nevertheless this is seen as being separate from personal identity (Turner, 1982). It is possible to see that individuals can belong to multiple social groups, and it is argued that these multiple social identities become salient in different contexts (Hogg, 1995). When salient, such as in a context of conflict, the need for positive self esteem⁴ drives members to strive for positive social identity. This social identity is of course that of the in-group, and the social identity perspective thereby becomes a useful tool in assessing group behaviour and the dynamics of membership.

Conclusion: Group Processes and the New Communities

³ Some more recent work has questioned this somewhat (Spears et al, 1999).

⁴ This is a concept developed in Festinger’s (1954) theory of social comparison.

How would the previous research presented on group processes be relevant to communities in late modernity? An initial effort must be made to construct a satisfactory definition of a group in the context of a discussion on communities. Is the concept of the 'group' indeed different from the concept of 'community', or are they in use, one and the same? This is no easy question to approach, as it has already been shown how multifaceted the various understandings of a 'group' are. Yet perhaps this is one of the strengths of the concept in contemporary times, when an individual's potential membership of groups multiplies (see Giddens, 1991; Gergen, 1991). Questions also arise when examining possible membership of internet groups and web-based 'communities'. For example, should they be understood as primary groups, even though it is difficult to argue that actual 'face-to-face' interaction occurs? It is debatable whether a physical bodily presence is required for a group to be considered as a community. Rheingold has defined 'virtual communities' as "social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people interact for long enough with sufficient feeling to form webs of personal relations in cyberspace" (Rheingold, quoted in Smith, accessed 2000). In light of the above discussion, we might want to suggest a definition that includes the concepts of social identity, cohesion and influence in addition to Rheingold's "sufficient feeling"; but nevertheless, it does not appear that a physical presence is necessary. The essential question is perhaps whether the processes work in the same way in these 'virtual' worlds as in the physical ones.

Clearly, one expectation of a fragmented and transitory group characteristic of late modernity would be that its cohesiveness is reduced. With less time to build up relationships of attraction, less time to play games and involve oneself in other non-explicitly goal-directed behaviour, it could be suggested that 'commitment' to these groups, which we can understand in this context as being a combination of cohesiveness and in-group preference, is reduced. Fundamentally, therefore, we could subsequently argue that the influence towards conformity would also be reduced. Yet Tajfel's work on the minimal group is strong evidence that in-group preference and out-group stereotyping can occur quickly, and with minimal effort to form complex social bonds. Perhaps when groups are so transitory, the salience of particular social identities is no more reduced than in long term memberships. Is it possible that social identities are in fact strengthened in that transitory moment of salient membership? These questions all point to the fact that more empirical study of late-modern groupings is required. The rest of this thesis takes on this task by exploring groups of contemporary Pagans.

Chapter Three: British Paganism as a Literature of History and Religion

Introduction

This thesis is about a collection of people who, at the beginning of a new millennium, claim to live ‘between the worlds’. They have one foot in the world of ‘mundane’ affairs - employment, education, family and relationships – yet their other foot is in another world far removed from this one: a world of fairies, spirits, goddesses and gods and fantastical magical powers. Developing over many years, but predominantly in the second half of the twentieth century, contemporary Paganism⁵ has in recent times become a prominent feature in British and American culture. Films such as *The Craft* and *The Blair Witch Project* and television series including *Buffy* and *Charmed* have brought themes of magic and witchcraft to the fore. Yet, despite the media attention from Hollywood and the availability of published material, the actual contemporary Pagan religion remains something of a subculture, hidden in many respects from the great majority of people. It is this border-crossing aspect of the religion – the practice of the practitioners in their everyday lives – that is of particular sociological interest, not least because in order to maintain a ‘Pagan identity’ whilst also remaining ‘hidden’ (if that is indeed the case) must require a particular set of social skills. These skills are directed to boundaries within the Pagan community, in addition to those more explicit boundaries without, and form some of the observable processes of doing community that are examined in the chapters to follow.

Before exploring these processes in different settings, it is helpful to present an introduction to the field of study: contemporary British Paganism. This chapter will consequently introduce some of the facets of the religion, with an aim to making some Pagan-specific aspects understandable. In order to do this, the chapter begins with an examination of the historical development of the contemporary Pagan movement. This is followed by a brief exploration of the different forms of Paganism, known as ‘traditions’

⁵ Academic study of this phenomenon has tended to use ‘Neopaganism’ as a defining term. However, the majority of the work has been conducted in the United States. I choose to use the term ‘Paganism’ as this is the one predominantly used by members of the religion in the UK. In fact, I have not met one British Pagan during my research who has defined their religion as ‘Neopaganism’. Similarly, I capitalise ‘Pagan’, as this is the practice found in Pagan journals and the majority of texts by Pagan authors.

by Pagans themselves. The final section of this chapter approaches the issues of Paganism in late modernity. As a developing religion, contemporary Paganism has had both the opportunity and challenge of maintaining a debate with academic studies of world religions while simultaneously finding its own boundaries and unique character. While it would be tempting to present only a 'Pagan perspective', perhaps staying true to the ethnographic ideal of accurately describing realities "without unduly disrupting – thus distorting – these worlds in the process" (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997:19), in 'reality' contemporary Pagans engage with academic texts that describe their religion, and this subsequently becomes part of their 'world'. Thus, it is necessary to comprehend the academic, 'expert' explications in addition to 'lay' Pagan understanding. Both of these two knowledges are explored in this chapter.

Drawing from the Past: The Development of Contemporary Paganism

One of the most striking features of contemporary Paganism is that it is extremely difficult to define, making sociological study challenging from the outset. Unlike many other religions or spiritual movements, there is no easily recognisable core text within which one can find the central tenets or moral discourse of Paganism. As yet, no 'Pagan bible' connecting all branches of the religion has been accepted, making it instantly in another category to the majority of the most popular monotheistic religions. Rather, several texts are referred to in Pagan discourse, written by both scholars and non-academic Pagans. As will be seen, the very idea of a central text would be anathema to many members of the Pagan community, as it would pose the danger of what is now a relatively fluid movement becoming stagnant and 'fundamentalist'. This is not of course to say that Paganism is incapable of fundamentalism – in fact in certain circumstances the fundamentalism is rife – but if there is one predominant feature of the current movement, it is that it is pluralistic and inclusive, at least this forms one of the claims of many members.

Ronald Hutton: The Pagan Scholar

With any contemporary community, it should be possible to locate it within a historical context, if not to discover its definitive 'origins', at the very least provide clues as to its broad cultural field. This task has been most clearly undertaken by one academic, Ronald

Hutton, who has published several books on the history and practices of Pagans past, recently focussing on the history of pagan witchcraft in Britain in *Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*, published in 1999. Academic study of Paganism is still relatively limited, and although it has increased dramatically since the late 1990s, much of it continues to emphasise the movement in the United States. Hutton, professor of History at Bristol University in the United Kingdom and a Pagan himself, remains one of the few to work almost solely on British Paganism in History and the present.

Undoubtedly his own Pagan faith helps his work to be accepted by other Pagans. He is quoted in several key Pagan texts, including those by Pagan-respected authors such as Vivianne Crowley (1994), and is regularly referred to in the Pagan Federation's journal, *Pagan Dawn*. Additionally, he makes regular appearances at Pagan conferences in the UK and abroad. He is therefore extremely well known in the Pagan community, and his account of the historical background of contemporary Paganism is cohesive and persuasive to many Pagans – at least in part. It is consequently useful to present some of his account here.

Before tracing a genealogy of contemporary Paganism, it is important to recognise that its cultural heritage is based, in part, on the locations where it is presently practiced. With this in mind, Hutton argues that Paganism in its present form is essentially a religion of Western Europe, Australia and the United States. It is certainly true that very little information is found in English about Pagan forms in other parts of the world and the references that are made to it are often produced by ex-patriots who continue practicing their religion while living in their new country⁶. One reason for this may be that those countries already have their own forms of 'nature-based' religion that can be adjusted to modern needs and therefore an imported one would be less likely to take a strong hold. Nevertheless, as Hutton suggests, it can be said that the catalyst that began the Western revival and reinvention of the contemporary Pagan religions was the publications and activities of one British man, Gerald Gardner. Gardner's book *Witchcraft Today*, published in 1954, fused previous speculative history with folklore and anthropology and when combined with his activities in a Witchcraft coven, instigated the growth and development of contemporary Paganism.

Hutton (1999), analysing published works contemporary to his periods of study, argues that over time there have been four 'languages' of paganism. These languages, or

⁶ See for example "Persephone in Japan", in *Pagan Dawn*, Autumn 2001, Pagan Federation.

ideological discourses, have informed past and present opinion about contemporary Paganism, and selectively have become the internal ideology of the current movement. The first of these languages belongs in the realm of early anthropological writings and missionary work overseas, and is essentially a negative portrayal of tribal religion. Within these texts, the ‘rational’, godly explorer, would expose rituals and behaviour that was wholly unacceptable to much of their nineteenth century readership, and due to the negative slant emphasised by the authors, these religious rituals were made all the more horrific. When placed within the context of Darwinian evolutionary theory that was becoming widely held by many, the similarity between contemporary ‘savages’ and the pre-Christian (thereby pre-civilised) peoples was easy to assume. By this process pagan and primitive savage became linked in further writings and rhetoric.

Hutton’s second language of paganism is positive. It is the approach taken by scholars of the same time period, and paradoxically went hand in hand with the above notion. Here the paganism is that of ancient Greece and Rome, seen to be intellectual, civilised and developed, in stark contrast to the ‘savage’. This paradox can be understood however, he claims, arguing that the Greek and Roman culture was seen as a pre-cursor to Christian religion and morality, consequently being a less-developed form of the latter. The primitive savage pagan was not seen as belonging to this same category. The first two languages therefore describe the attitudes primarily in pre-twentieth century literature. Hutton continues his exploration by turning his attention to a more ostensibly ‘religious’ discourse – his third ‘language’ – that of the theosophical movement formed by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky in the late nineteenth century and her influential book *Isis Unveiled*, produced in 1878. Blavatsky argues that understanding of the world should come from combining both science and psychic investigation. Hutton suggests that although she may be seen as a pagan, “the multi-cultural, supranational Blavatsky remained at heart what she had been as a girl: a Russian Orthodox Christian” (Hutton, 1999:19). This discourse brings the notion of a ‘single divine world-soul’ and, due to Blavatsky’s love of eastern religion, the principle of reincarnation is predominant. These two aspects to Theosophy will be seen to have become absorbed into contemporary Paganism.

Finally we come to Hutton’s central argument, that the modern form of Paganism derives from the fourth ‘language’: German Romanticism. Although the Enlightenment paved the way for a questioning of the dominant religious forms, it is in German Romanticism that the most powerful influence on the development of a contemporary Pagan discourse can

be found⁷. Hutton claims that it can be seen as the combination of three forces: “admiration for ancient Greece, nostalgia for a vanished past, and desire for an organic unity between people, culture, and nature” (Hutton, 1999: 21). Although this began in the mid-eighteenth centuries, he states that it can be traced through to the poetry and prose of Keats and Shelly and beyond to the writings of D.H. Lawrence and E.M. Forster. By using these authors, he demonstrates how ideas of pagan worship (of Greek gods) and love of ‘nature’ had developed in the nineteenth century in the arts. Within this network there were even calls for revival of the pagan religions. This is when the term ‘pagan’ took on a positive, liberated artistic meaning. The fourth language – German Romanticism – was to influence much of British culture and academic thought. Evidently, when seen from the enduring perspective of the Enlightenment’s questioning of Christianity, in addition to a nostalgic sentiment of anti-industrialism found in the Romanticism in England, the stage was set for interest in new forms of ‘nature’ spirituality. It was in this context that, Hutton states, Gerald Gardner produced *Witchcraft Today*, and modern Paganism emerged.

According to Hutton, the history of modern Paganism is long and complex. Although these differing discourses relate to many forms of paganism, it is difficult to argue that any of the people who espoused them were ‘Pagan’ in the present form, at least until Gerald Gardner. Authors prior to him had remained either interested observers of other cultures – whether holding positive or negative attitudes to state Christianity – or ‘pagan’ in the nineteenth century sense of anti-establishment practices. It is interesting therefore to see exactly what influence these ‘languages’ have in Paganism as it is today. Certainly the Paganism of Greece and Rome can be seen in many Pagan rituals as described in books such as Janet and Stewart Farrar’s (1987) *The Witches’ Goddess* and their popular (1984) *The Witches Way*⁸, and the use of the four ‘elements’ is observable in the majority of Pagan Magic. In effect, the history of Paganism cannot be separated from its current practice, if the practice examined is that of Magic. As will be seen in Chapter Five, the standard ritual format remains the same as that produced by Gerald Gardner in his conception of modern Witchcraft. The ritual components of a ‘magic circle’, four ‘elements’ of Earth, Air, Fire and Water and the concepts of ‘energy’ can all be seen to stem from the influences that Hutton cites. Nevertheless, his book is interesting in another sense: that it affords a certain amount of respectability to Paganism. Hutton writes

⁷ Hutton argues that the Enlightenment discourse might be better seen as Deism or Atheism, rather than paganism, and therefore we can assume that this is not a separate ‘language’ but merely one more influence.

⁸ This has been reissued as ‘A Witches Bible’ (1996) by Phoenix Publishing and was offered as ‘required reading’ at several Pagan meetings I attended.

a text that, in spite of his use of ‘languages’ to avoid a simplistic linear history, gives contemporary Paganism a concrete past.

Categorising Contemporary Paganism: Sociology of Religion

Without a doubt, during the research for this thesis, Ronald Hutton was the academic author referred to most at Pagan gatherings. His is a name that many will recognise, but there are others who have been working on Paganism in Britain and that also make appearances at the same conferences as Pagans. There is a growing field of study in Religious Studies and Sociology departments that approaches Paganism in contemporary times. The texts produced by these authors attempt to understand the ‘religious’ aspect of the movement: its beliefs and magical acts. All of these studies have the same difficulty, expressed accurately by Graham Harvey (1996b):

It is not possible to produce a list of beliefs to which all Pagans would assent. The number and names of divinities vary considerably - not only between Druids and Wiccans (for example) but even from one Coven or Grove to the next. In a public ('open') ceremony one Pagan might say 'Goddess' and the next will understand that to be a reference to all the Goddesses or even to all living things, or to the entire cosmos. (Harvey, 1996b).

This conundrum has not prevented many religious studies scholars from attempting to categorise contemporary Paganism as one homogenous group, however. Many have attempted to fit it neatly into previously existing religious categories. Hanegraaf, for example, in his in-depth study, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, has placed Paganism within the New Age movement, although he is keen to emphasise that the claim is with reservations. Ronald Hutton has observed the trend and suggested that “scholars who have specialized in studying the New Age have generally accepted Paganism, including witchcraft, to be an aspect of that movement. Those who have studied Paganism are insistent that it is not” (Hutton, 1999: 411). The literature emerging from Pagan academics like Hutton is strongly in favour of removing Paganism from firm associations with the New Age. Hanegraaf suggests that in the case of one author, it is “inspired by apologetic considerations” due to the fact that he himself is a neopagan

(Hanegraff, 1998)⁹. Joanne Pearson (1998), essentially taking a similar approach to Roy Wallis (1984), argues that while followers of the New Age seek to escape the modern world, Wiccans - followers of Wicca, one form of Paganism – attempt to live within it and improve it. It seems clear that the two movements have similarities and differences. Nevertheless, it does appear that the distinction is not as clear as these authors would like it to be¹⁰.

Traditions: A Pagan Perspective

At the same time as Sociologists of religion have been grappling with contemporary Paganism in a context of secularisation and contrary New Age practices, Pagans themselves have been organising and categorising their beliefs according to ‘traditions’. This has been reflected in the writings of Pagan academics and in the growth of books devoted to the practices of each tradition. Carpenter (1996), in examining these different traditions, states that

Contemporary Paganism represents a synthesis of historical inspiration and present-day creativity. While the authenticity of historical claims can certainly be questioned, such claims nevertheless provide inspiration for the current evolution of new forms of spirituality. (Carpenter, 1996:47)

It has been argued convincingly that ‘tradition’, particularly on a broad scale, can be seen to be invented in times more recent than that often claimed (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). Magliocco (2000) has noted the difficulty in seeing folk traditions as ‘survivals’ from a pre-Christian era, as it does not fully take into account cultural changes. We can apply this to the Pagan religion’s ‘traditions’, suggesting that, while some practices may have roots in pre-history, it is likely that they have changed beyond recognition throughout history. The Pagans I spoke to often used the term ‘path’ instead of ‘tradition’, perhaps as a method of overcoming the rather dubious claims of authentic heredity claimed by many.

⁹ The author is Aiden Kelly of (1991) *Crafting the Art of Magic: Book I*, St. Paul, Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications.

¹⁰ For example, Hutton (1999) states that “[o]ne of the most celebrated claims of the New Age is that humans make their own reality; I have yet to meet a pagan witch who would agree”. My own research has led me to several Pagan Witches who would concur with the New Age statement given.

Traditions within Paganism are certainly difficult to place into categories with comfortable margins between them, and this is not just a theoretical problem, but one aspect of actually practicing the religion. Nevertheless, it is possible to distinguish certain characteristics of each of the general self-defined Pagan paths. This is made an easier task by the fact that, in the most part, categories are already provided in the form of Pagan organisations for each. The Pagan traditions that most commonly arose at Pagan meetings are briefly considered below.

Witchcraft

Arguably, Gerald Gardner generated the present Pagan religions by being the first to provide a systemised structure that held large-scale appeal to potential ‘converts’. The religion he helped generate was ‘Wicca’, an initiation-based Pagan tradition. Debates continue to rage within the broad Pagan community as to the authenticity of Gardner’s claims to have ‘discovered’ an existing religion, rather than have invented one. It is not necessary to present these debates here, as it has been adequately done elsewhere (Hutton, 1999; Valiente, 1989; Oakseer, 1999). Ideas of heritage and lineage are important to the Pagan practitioners and the ongoing tide of research into the history of Wicca by Pagan members is a testament to that fact. Adler (2000) suggests that many Pagans are so attached to a notion of unbroken lineage for their tradition that Pagan scholarship has been greeted with extreme hostility. Evidently, the structure of much contemporary Paganism is deeply embedded within historical authenticity. It is enough here to suggest that Gerald Gardner may possibly have uncovered an old Witchcraft coven, although undoubtedly many of Wicca’s rituals are of modern origin¹¹.

During the research for this thesis, the majority of Pagans that I met defined themselves as ‘Witches’. Within this category, it is Wicca that is by far the largest influence. Lewis (1999) provides a list of characteristics of Wicca. He states that within Wicca, worship is polytheistic, usually perceiving of a goddess close to the ultimate level of divinity. Secondly, this worship takes place in small groups called covens meeting monthly, although eight times a year larger meetings occur where several covens and individuals meet. Thirdly, Wicca includes the practice of working both folk magic and ceremonial magic. There are yet further sub-categories such as ‘Gardnerian’ or ‘Alexandrian’ Wicca - a tradition that claims lineage directly to Gerald Gardner or is heavily inspired by it.

¹¹ See for example Clifton, Chas, “A Goddess Arrives: The Novels of Dion Fortune and the Development of Gardnerian Witchcraft”, <http://members.tripod.com/conjurefolk/fortune.html> (accessed July, 2001)

Nevertheless, the structure of Wiccan ritual is relatively constant and informs much Witchcraft and, as will be seen in Chapter Five, elements are incorporated into ‘eclectic’ Paganism. Divinity is usually seen as dual in nature, and consequently, although the goddess may be perceived as ‘higher’ in the divine hierarchy, there is usually a god which serves to create a polarity of energy (Farrar and Farrar, 1984). Wiccan worship will often aim to utilise knowledge of these polarised energies, frequently using invocation as a method of contacting the divine (Lewis, 1999).

One of the most evident features of Wicca, and the Witchcraft that it inspires, is that the structure of ritual and method of working magic nearly always utilises a ‘magic circle’. This is an aspect of its history and use of the methods of ceremonial magic that drew strongly from the system of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (Hutton, 1999). This system assigns different ‘elements’ to each of the cardinal points on the circle, evoking each to create sacred space (Regardie, 1994). Although Wicca was originally an arrangement of hierarchy based around the format of covens, working within a group is no longer necessary in order to be Wiccan. From my own research it appears that in fact initiation from a member of a coven is often not desired. Doreen Valiente, Gardner’s original high priestess, published a self-initiation ritual in her (1978) book *Witchcraft for Tomorrow*, and since then innumerable others have been distributed, often emerging from American authors¹². Nevertheless, there is still an amount of prestige associated with coven initiation amongst some Pagans.

It is not difficult to appreciate why Loretta Orion, in her study of American Neopaganism, complained that “my effort to present a clear image of the Neopagans is compromised somewhat by their hypertrophied individualism and their resistance to any semblance of uniformity” (Orion, 1995: 7). However, confusion can be reduced by noting that *generally* Wiccans would define themselves as Witches, but that not all Witches would define themselves as Wiccans. ‘Witchcraft’ appears to be one form of Paganism that follows the general structural characteristics suggested above. Lewis notes:

The term *tradition* is used among Neopagan Witches to mean something like what *denomination* means among protestants. A tradition will have some sort of family

¹² See for example the large range of books published by Llewellyn. Amongst the Pagans I had contact with, the majority of those that had been involved in the Pagan movement for a number of years held a certain amount of hostility towards the Llewellyn books, due to its perceived ‘watering down’ of the mysteries of Paganism.

tree going back to its founder, some sort of loose criteria for whether a coven still belongs to the tradition... (Lewis, 1999:290)

While this is certainly the case for the majority of Wiccans, in practice I have found that Pagans in Britain who identify with a particular tradition (often simply, 'Witchcraft') put little emphasis on the founder of their 'path'. Equating tradition and denomination seems problematic in this respect, as the Witchcraft that they utilise to label themselves has very little organised authority; in fact this is one of the defining features of its attraction. In addition, of course, those Pagans who do not belong to covens are not included in this observation. Nonetheless, Lewis includes the important remark:

Despite the anarchism of Neopagan Witches and their freedom to innovate within their covens and their lives, they are just as clear as members of other religions about which individuals and groups belong to their religion and which do not.
(Lewis, 1999: xiii)

Contemporary Paganism can be seen to be no different to other, more centrally organised religions, in that its members are clearly concerned with group membership: both their own and others.

Northern Traditions

The Northern Traditions of Paganism are perhaps the most structured and yet misunderstood of all. Members of this tradition often prefer to use the term 'Heathen' to define themselves rather than Pagan, 'heathen' being a North-European equivalent to the Latin term 'pagan' (Harvey, 1996). Indeed during the period of research I encountered hostile recriminations when I suggested that one Heathen was a Pagan in introducing him to newcomer at a Pagan meeting. Followers of this tradition are often members of the several organised groups in Britain, such as The Odinshof or The Odinic Rite, and these associations provide ritual dates and methods of celebration, hence its strength as a structured Tradition. Rituals, or *blots* as they are often known, usually follow a different format to that of Witchcraft, having no magic circle for example. By far the most prominent feature of the Northern Tradition is its use of 'Runes', an ancient alphabet that, in addition to being a writing tool, also hold symbolic meanings (Pennick, 1991). In

common with many other aspects of Paganism, the runes have been absorbed into the contemporary commercial market, in the form of pendants and divination stones available in 'new age' shops, but to Heathens they hold much more significance.

The Northern tradition, unlike the other traditions, has had to attempt to overcome neo-facist connections that stem in part from neo-nazi interest in the occult interests of the Third Reich both in Britain and in the United States (Kaplan, 1996). Yet it has not completely been successful in this endeavour, and within the Pagan community, much prejudice still exists towards this tradition from other Pagans¹³. Arguably this has strengthened the resolve of its members and subsequently the organisations there to serve them. In the light of accusations of racism, it is interesting to note that morality and ethics are central to the practices of the Northern Traditions.

Druidry

Druidry, upon first impressions, may be seen to have had a long history, perhaps the longest of all the Pagan traditions. Images of modern Druids at Stonehenge continue to dominate the news at the time of the Summer Solstice, and this may suggest that there is a direct connection between the structure of pre-history and Druidry. Hutton (1999) notes that there were secret organisations in the late nineteenth century, using similar structures to Freemasonry, and terming themselves Druids. Nevertheless it was in the 1980s, after the development and expansion of Gardner's Wicca, that contemporary Druidry really expanded. In fact the founders of two Druid organisations had been Wiccan priests.

Druidry, in common with the Northern Tradition, has a belief in honouring ancestors, yet Druid authors claim that it is unique partly in its fundamental emphasis on developing skills that may be considered by secular society as non-religious. These include poetry, music and story-telling, in addition to philosophising and divining (Shallcrass, 1995). The Chief Druid of the British Druid Order, Phillip Shallcrass explains one of the features of Druidry:

There are no dogmas in Druidry, just 'catmas'. Dogmas are rigid beliefs often received from others, that tend to stifle freedom of thought and expression.

¹³ Many Pagans immediately associated Heathenism with racism when I asked them about their knowledge of the tradition.

Catmas are fluid beliefs, held only as long as they have value, perhaps until they are superseded by our growth in experience and understanding. (Shallcrass, 2000: 3)

This quote reveals much about contemporary Pagan ideology to emerge since the late 1980s, both within the tradition of Druidry and in the wider Pagan movement. The belief that there is no dogma within Druidry is generally echoed by the Pagan community.

Shamanism

If Druidry and the Northern Traditions are the most organised paths of Paganism, then Shamanism can be seen as the opposite extreme. It is one of the most difficult traditions to define satisfactorily because it is undoubtedly the most internal of them all. Gordon MacLellan, a Pagan who claims that ‘Shaman’ is a term given by others to him rather than by himself, suggests that one would “sooner catch mist in a jam-jar than find easy definitions within a shamanic world” (MacLellan, 1995: 139). This inner lack of self-definition is displayed outwardly by many Pagans who use Shamanic ‘tools’ such as sweat lodges at Pagan camps to create an ‘out of the ordinary’ appearance, while defining themselves as Witches.

Shamanism is a process of conversing with the spirit-world usually by ‘travelling’ there in an altered state of consciousness (Harner, 1990). Techniques to get into this trance state most usually involve listening to repetitive drumming, but may also include dance, or ingesting substances (Matthews, 1995). Hanegraaf (1998) in adding to the suggestion of Hartmut Zinser, argues that contemporary ‘neoshamanism’ should be distinguished from the shamanism of traditional cultures. One of the reasons given is the emphasis on travelling *to* the spirits made by neoshamans in contrast to a more traditional approach where the spirits may travel to, and possess, the shaman.

High Magic

The employment of the term ‘High Magic’ to describe this tradition is not entirely helpful, as it seems to suggest that the other traditions previously mentioned develop and use ‘low magic’. This is certainly not the case, as much of Wiccan ritual is derived from the same

origins as this tradition, and, to a certain extent its structure may be employed by followers of the other traditions. However, other options such as ‘ceremonial magic’ or ‘ritual magic’ – all terms employed by Pagan authors – seem to hold even more difficulties. Greenwood (2000) uses this distinction in her study of the occult subculture in Britain, suggesting that High Magic, in contrast to Witchcraft, is essentially a process of training the mind and body through contact with the otherworld in order to reach the divine ‘spark’ within. It seems wise to understand High Magic in a similar fashion to the given description of Shamanism, as a tool rather than a religion in itself. Indeed, this suits the High Magic tradition well, as it is a system adopted by followers of a liberal Christian tradition as well as by Pagans. In fact, much of its symbolism is drawn from the Judeo-Christian religions.

Despite understanding High Magic as a system of techniques, it is nonetheless true that in its purest and original form it has an ultimate goal or “the great work”. This is to understand the interaction between the macrocosm (the universe) and the microcosm (the self) (Matthews, 1986). In addition to various exercises of meditation, ‘energy’ work, and invocation, High Magic has the added feature of evocation of spirits. The magician, within a complex ritual that includes intense visualisation and concentration, can summon up a spirit and command it to do his or her will (Conway, 1988). This approach does seem to be in contrast to the other more negotiable traditions such as Druidry or Heathenism, yet this does not prevent the techniques of High Magic being used by other Pagans. At a regular Pagan meeting I attended, in amongst the discussions of nature spirits and Earth healing, there was often talk of spirit and demon evocation and High Magic energy raising techniques.

As a final note on tradition, it is perhaps necessary here to restate that the situation in the United States is remarkably different to that of Britain. Some of these differences have already been noted, but the principle difference – that the system of organisation in American Neopaganism is more formally structured – must be made clear. Neopaganism in the United States exists on a much larger scale, and due to the different political and religious structure, associations for the various traditions have extremely large memberships¹⁴. In contrast, in the United Kingdom informal connections are made through meetings of small groups in pubs and Pagan’s homes. These are the ‘moots’ that are discussed in the next chapter. Additionally, fears were expressed among many Pagans

¹⁴ These organisations include Circle Sanctuary, the Church of All Worlds, the Covenant of the Goddess (Hopman and Bond, 1996)

that I met that a process of ‘commercialisation’ of their religion is occurring on a dramatic scale, based principally on the power of American publishing houses.

“We are the old ones, We are the new ones” – Paganism as Late Modern Religion

The brief exploration of some of the most prominent traditions within British Paganism illustrates the diversity and complexity of the movement. These complexities are compounded by the sheer range of spiritual options available to contemporary Pagans. The bookstores are filled with books that can educate the reader into magical techniques and ritual structures. With so many competing methods of worship, both the academic and the Pagan alike must sort out their understanding of the phenomenon or practice. Giddens (1991) has characterised late modernity as a period of doubt. He points out that

Even the most reliable authorities can be trusted only ‘until further notice’; and the abstract systems that penetrate so much of day-to-day life normally offer multiple possibilities rather than fixed guidelines or recipes for action. Experts can always be turned to, but experts themselves frequently disagree. (Giddens, 1991:84)

In late modernity then, there are competing knowledges of expert and lay people, of academic and Pagan, and of Pagan scholars. This can be seen in the following chapter, where one member questions Ronald Hutton’s comprehensiveness in presenting the history of Paganism. In one sense, however, both Pagans and ‘Pagan studies’ researchers are approaching the same question: that of whether contemporary Paganism is a ‘religion’ or not. For the researcher, this is necessary to allow analysis on the same level as previous religious studies. For the Pagan in Britain, it is a political need, to counter perceived discrimination in the law.

Defining exactly what constitutes ‘religion’ is no easy task. In itself, the study of religion can have many interpretations, from Hegel’s understanding of ‘Geist’ to Daly’s critique of repressive patriarchal monotheism (Cunningham, 1999). One of the authors used most by Pagans to support the idea of their beliefs being part of a long spiritual history is James Frazer, born in 1854 (Hutton, 1999). Frazer defines religion as “a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course

of nature and of human life” (Frazer, 1993: 50). E. B. Tylor proposed a simpler definition, “the belief in spiritual beings” or animism (Cunningham, 1999). Religion from this perspective is therefore reliant upon a fundamental belief in supernatural powers. It is easy to see the aptness of this approach in considering Paganism, a system of belief that holds powerful hidden forces at its centre. Yet this belief is perhaps better understood as something other than religion alone – it is only one aspect of religious belief that is important but not necessarily essential. The idea of ‘religion’ seems to encompass more than a belief in otherworldly powers or beings, and to suggest the contrary clearly loses sight of the structural and organisational features inherent in religion as experienced in history. Yet it is this approach that many Pagans will take in defending their rights: to time off work for religious holidays, for example. Often reference is made to other religions to support their cause:

So what's the difference between a "belief system" and a religion? There is no definition, in UK law at least, of just what and what is not a religion, but that doesn't hinder the practice of religions. Rastafarianism, for instance, is hardly mainstream, but is accepted generally as a belief system (although it is not accepted as a legal defence in drug cases!) I see no need for any legal definition of what a 'true' religion is. How, for instance, would you define Christianity in legal terms, given the huge variety of 'Christian' practice and belief? (Barbara, *British Pagans* list, 2003)

Certainly we have seen that Paganism is not one system of beliefs, but many different traditions with their own particular sets of philosophies.

Morality

Giddens (1991) argues that late modernity is a time where life-political issues drive calls for a remoralising of social life. Rather than late modernity seeing the end of morality in an environment of high reflexivity, morality is actually brought to the fore. Within the structural differences between the traditions of contemporary Paganism and the competing expertise of Pagans and other writers, one would expect to find corresponding tensions of moral rhetoric. Yet surprisingly, from the perspective of published material, the ideals of most of these perspectives are the same. For example, The Odinic Rite, one of the main Heathen organisations, holds the family in high regard and states that one of the

obligations is “to aid and be aided in sickness and distress” (Odinic Rite [online], accessed June 2001). The Odinshof, another Heathen organisation, is involved in saving woodland from development (Jennings, 1999), as is the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids (OBOD [online], accessed July 2001). Isaac Bonowits, a renowned author and Druid in the United States, writes that

We believe that ethics and morality should be based upon joy, self-love and mutual respect, the avoidance of actual harm to others, and the increase of public benefit. We try to balance people's needs for personal autonomy and growth with the necessity of paying attention to the impact of each individual's actions on the lives and welfare of others. (Bonowits, accessed July, 2001)

Both Druidry and the Northern Traditions place great emphasis on ‘morality’ in their published materials, as can be seen in the quote above. In addition to the claim that Druids attempt to balance individualistic action with collective responsibility, Bonowits also illustrates the notion of Paganism as self-development in his suggestion that it addresses the need for personal growth.

The emphasis upon a concern for the environment stretches across all Pagan paths, with the exception perhaps of High magic and Shamanism, which have already been argued as being techniques rather than traditions. Vivianne Crowley (1994) suggests that a feature common to all Pagans is the location of their deities within the universe, rather than outside of it. She argues that this pantheistic religion holds the Earth as sacred – it is a “green religion” (Crowley, 1994: 32). If Paganism has one ethic that the majority of members would ascribe to, it is this respect for the environment. However, in this research I found that rarely do the majority of Pagans take steps towards environmentalism as a movement, this being left to ‘marginal’ eco-activists.

Perhaps more radical morality can be found in the treatment of gender issues. Certainly since the late 1980s Paganism has presented itself in print as being an egalitarian, equal spirituality, often based on male-female balance or at the very least non-hierarchical (Starhawk, 1989). It is arguable if this is actually the case in the practice of Pagan groups. Gender, nonetheless, does have centrality to the Pagan experience. Greenwood (2000) has suggested that although women may be venerated in the ‘otherworld’, the same is not necessarily true in the social world of Paganism. She writes of her interest at attending a

High Magic enactment of the ‘Gnostic Mass’, as it is a ritual where “woman and the female sexuality [is] the focus of veneration” (Greenwood, 2000: 107). It is a reversal, she suggests, of all that Christianity considers sacred¹⁵. While it is true that in the ritual female sexuality is venerated, one interpretation of the ritual may be that it illustrates a reinforcement of gender stereotypes – creating an image of the female as objectified sexuality, yearning for the romantic attentions of the priest. Whether this is the case or not, it remains a powerful enactment of heterosexual sexuality as the priestess orates:

“I charge you earnestly to come before me in a single robe, and covered with Ra rich headdress. I love you! I yearn to you! Pale or purple, veiled or voluptuous, I who am all pleasure and purple, and drunkenness of the inner most sense, desire you” (Crowley, 1975: 427)

For Pagans, one of the defining features of their religion is its standpoint towards the sexual. In the belief systems of many Pagans, sexuality in all its forms is sacred. Pike (2001) notes, in examining behaviour at Neopagan festivals in the United States, that at certain locations, such as at the festival fire, ‘gender play’ occurs. She observes for example that “cross-dressing at festivals is practiced by gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people, as well as straight men and women who are playing with assumptions about gender that participants bring with them” (Pike, 2001: 202). Paganism therefore has the potential to offer liberation from expected gender roles, or conversely, to experience more deeply stereotyped images of masculinity and femininity.

Magic

Breaking down boundaries, or “opening the mind”, as one Pagan put it to me, is connected with the most unique feature of contemporary Paganism: with an emphasis on the use of magic. Although magic is an aspect of other religions, it is often as one element and may be defined as something other than ‘magic’. In Paganism, however, it is central to the religious experience. Arriving at a definition of magic is difficult, not least because Pagans will use different explanations themselves. The most frequent definition given by Pagans is that of Aleister Crowley, originally given to define his own brand of ‘magick’¹⁶:

¹⁵ The Gnostic Mass was written by Aleister Crowley and consists of various adorations towards a woman who lies naked on the altar, effectively becoming the altar herself (See Crowley, 1973).

¹⁶ Crowley spelled the term with a ‘k’ to distinguish it from the magic practiced by others. The ‘k’ is used because the numerical value of *Cheth* – the Hebrew equivalent – is the letter for Hermes, therefore Hermetic science (Grant, 1972).

Magick is the Science and Art of causing Change to occur in conformity with will.
(Crowley, 1929: 131)

In approaching the subject of magic, Anthropology and Sociology have developed a different conception. Greenwood (2000) examines these approaches, suggesting that Frazer's (1993) hypothesis of sympathetic magic, originally published between 1890 and 1915, is still the basic definition used today. Mauss' *General Theory of Magic* (1950) generated a distinction between magic and religion, and attempted to define magic in terms of ritual action. Mauss suggests that "a magical rite is any rite which does not play a part in organised cults – it is private, secret, mysterious and approaches the limit of a prohibited rite" (Mauss, 1950: 24). This definition, which upon initial analysis may seem to be marginal to the present study, may actually tell more about contemporary Pagan activities than expected. If magical practice is a characteristic of being Pagan, then these marginal activities - approaching the limits of prohibited behaviour - will be clear aspects of the boundaries between Pagans and non-Pagans. This is arguably the case at Pagan festivals, where, as Sarah Pike discovered in the United States, the transformative power of magic, including its taboo nature, is compatible with festival experience:

In its various meanings, magic is essentially a method of consciously separating oneself from the world of the everyday and moving into a realm where possibilities are open for physical or psychological transformation, which is what festival goers experience when they attend festivals. (Pike, 2001: 13)

These transformations are not saved solely for Pagan festivals. The use of Magic has, for some Pagans, the potential for social change, leading to a more liberal society. Orion (1995) suggests that Pagan gatherings are rehearsals for a future utopia, based on egalitarianism. Yet an examination of Magic as used by Pagans appears to be a rehearsal for a more individualistic world, where individuals are free to explore themselves and their possibilities without limitation. It is this 'playing with the self' (Pike, 2001) that has led some authors, such as Helen Berger (1999), to characterise contemporary Paganism as late modern. As will be seen in the following chapters, it is not only the spiritual beliefs held that suggest this, but also the manner in which Pagans organise themselves at small-group gatherings in different contexts.

Part II: Doing a Pagan Community in Dedicated Settings

Chapter Four: The Northtown and Westcity Moots

Introduction

The previous three chapters have presented a broad grounding in previous conceptualisations of community and group processes, and an introduction to contemporary Paganism. To this point, two suggestions have been given. Firstly, it is difficult to understand community in late modernity as being based principally upon location, or on macro-social features such as social or economic class. Thus, Maffesoli's argument that it is in the smaller, transient and fragmented social situations that late modern community will be found, gives rise to the analysis in the chapters to follow, which focuses on observing interaction in these contexts. Secondly, it is suggested that contemporary Paganism can be understood as an example of a late modern religion, in that its beliefs and magical practices are characteristic of late modernity's 'reflexive project of the self' (Giddens, 1991), and that its members are part of a debate that incorporates expertise from various sources. It can be suggested that a religion such as contemporary Paganism, located within a late modern context of small, reasonably dislocated groupings, would have distinctive characteristics pertaining to its status as 'community'. In other words, the manner in which Pagans demonstrate and maintain their 'togetherness' should be evident in those contexts when they are together as groups. This should be born in mind when reading the following chapters that analyse observed interactions in several Pagan settings.

This chapter examines two Pagan moots, held at 'Northtown' and 'Westcity'. The word 'moot', stemming from the Old English to mean 'converse' or 'meet' (Allen, 1990), has been appropriated by British Pagans to denote their regular informal meetings that take place in the majority of towns and cities up and down the country. They are extremely common: On the *ukpaganlinks.co.uk* site for example, 68 moots are listed and *oakleafcircle.org* gives 106, including 12 in London alone. Moots are held in the homes of individual Pagans, in Pagan or New Age shops or most commonly, in Public Houses.

Methodology

The following chapter is based on ethnographic fieldwork that spanned three years from the end of 1999 to the beginning of 2003. I attended a great number of moots over that period in towns and cities predominantly in the North of England. My visits to moots in the South of the UK lead me to believe that any differences based on location are negligible. Over the course of the three years I became a regular attendee at monthly moots in three different cities, until one of these dissolved through declining interest, when ultimately the only individuals attending were myself and the organiser. I subsequently discovered that many of the previous attendees of that moot had begun to attend another in a city nearby. This, in addition to discussions with moot-members, suggests that it is common for individuals to select one moot to attend regularly, rather than visiting several randomly. Most Pagans will simply go to the moot in the town or city that is nearest to their home. In situations where there is more than one moot in a similar location, there tends to be regular shifting of membership between them. After the disbanding of one of the three moots, I decided to concentrate on the other two, Northtown and Westcity, in order to gain detailed data on the group interaction and processes over time.

In a very real sense, during the course of this research, I ‘immersed’ myself (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975) into the Pagan ‘scene’, becoming a face in the milieu of moot attendees. The moots led to my participation in public and private rituals, Pagan camps and conferences, and visits to Pagan homes to conduct interviews or simply to ‘chat’. Within this intense participation, friendships were made, lost and regained and I as a researcher learnt about the difficulties of in-depth research, but also the pleasures of interacting with such varied people in different contexts. This is not unusual for ethnographic research of course; infamous studies such as Whyte’s (1955) *Street Corner Society* or Goffman’s (1968) *Asylums* have given accounts of the processes of gaining ‘access’ or entry (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995) to the field. The principal authors of ethnographies of Paganism have presented similar statements (Luhmann, 1989; Greenwood, 2000; Pike, 2001), each telling a story of careful entry and subsequent limitations of their researcher position. In the introduction to her study of the otherworld, in which she too participated in magical rituals, Greenwood (2000) describes the dilemma of conducting insider research:

Even though I participated fully in magical experiences I could never totally become a magician. I could never switch off the constant observation and questions in the back of my mind, and I soon learnt that it was not acceptable to question too much – emotions, rather than rational thought, were given priority. (Greenwood, 2000:15).

One may wonder exactly what she was doing at these events to learn of the unacceptability of asking questions. More specifically, her statement suggests that she is somehow different to other new members of Pagan groups, by the fact that she is a researcher rather than a ‘normal’ participant. My own experience is rather different in that after a short period I observed other newcomers regularly having to learn what the preferred behaviour is in each context. The question may be raised, however, of the ethics of this seemingly covert approach. There are several responses to this. The first is to state that in these contexts, particularly in moots where the members change from month to month, it is simply not possible to openly declare one’s intentions to everyone. A constant ‘outing’ of oneself would not only disrupt the ‘normal’ flow of interaction, but would be a constant reminder to the others that the researcher is an ‘outsider’. Additionally, rather than seeing covertness or secrecy as unethical, we can note that this occurs in daily life and is a necessary element of ‘impression management’ (Goffman, 1959). We cannot know the intentions of other members, just as they could not know mine. Fundamentally, however, in this research the topic of interest was not the beliefs nor moral character of individuals, but rather the way that their actions worked together in their ‘community’. If personal beliefs or morality emerge in the analysis, it is how these are expressed and work, rather than their validity in and of themselves. Finally, in those cases where I participated in private ‘closed’ rituals, when I joined a coven, and when conducting the long interviews used in Chapter Seven, I made every effort to inform the participants of my position as a researcher. This included, at times, explaining the basic ‘theory’ to my research, although in a grounded study such as this one, it was not always possible to be entirely clear about this.

Many of the decisions made early in the research were the most basic. At the initial moots I had to decide where would be the best place to sit to observe interaction most clearly. I also had to consider whether, in the light of the above discussion, I wished to pose as a researcher or attempt to immerse myself fully. In my first moots I sat on the periphery of the core groups, endeavouring to be in a position to get an overview of the entire meeting.

It soon proved to be unsuccessful and as I began to recognise the impossibility of such an aim I moved to sit closer to the organiser of each moot. This was a deliberate effort to be part of the space where the most interaction between different people occurred. During these first months the decision also had to be made as to the most effective method of recording my observations. One option considered was using a tape recorder to gather oral interaction, but like Greenwood (2000) and Luhrmann (1989), I decided that this was too intrusive and would not allow me to participate fully in the moots. My observations were consequently recorded at times when I could write something inconspicuously or more usually I made 'scratchnotes' (Emerson et al, 1995) immediately after a moot visit, writing up into full fieldnotes once I arrived home. A final point to note is that in order to preserve the anonymity of members, all names of people and places have been changed and extracts from fieldnotes are marked with only the year of the event. In emotionally powerful contexts of rituals and at some moots, interpersonal connections and behaviour could be easily recognisable if linked with an exact date. Reducing the given date to a year removes some of that possibility.

Moot Structure

Moots are permanent features of Paganism in Britain in that, despite sometimes changing location – The Northtown Moot has been held in various pubs over the years – they tend to remain in action, persistently taking place monthly or even weekly. While some may stop functioning, new ones appear in their place, or they restart soon afterwards. They are, then, in one sense transitory and yet in another, permanent, as their abundance presents constant opportunities for Pagans to meet. The apparently amorphous nature of moots can be seen by looking at the attendance of members. Some moots may be comprised of only three or four people, while others can have as many as 50. This variation is not only according to location, but also from month to month. One month there may be 15 people while the following moot might only have five or six. Nevertheless, in general numbers do not vary greatly at the same moot. The Westcity moot usually had at least 10 members and only once fell below five, while the Northtown moot was always attended by at least 15 people and more usually above 25. The gender of participants was roughly equal at both, and this was also the case at the moots I attended in other locations. The range of ages at moots is large, although in university towns or cities there are greater number of teenagers and Pagans in their twenties. These students often belong to Pagan associations

or societies at their universities, some of which organise their own moots¹⁷. Some authors (for example Luhrmann, 1989; Hutton, 1999) have attempted to characterise Pagan adherents according to socio-economic status, suggesting that the majority of members are drawn from the white middle classes. My observations at moots (and the other settings explored) suggest that, while certainly the majority appear to be white, their backgrounds are far more varied. All this suggests the rather obvious fact that we cannot classify contemporary British Pagans as a homogenous group.

In theory, moots present an opportunity for Pagans of every persuasion to get together and discuss topics with other Pagans in an informal environment. There is no formal requirement of membership, as these events are open to any member of the public. In practice, the forms of advertisement for moots restrict membership to those who either read Pagan magazines, view Pagan internet sites, or frequent Pagan or New Age shops. Although an informal occasion, like rituals and conferences discussed in later chapters, moots require a certain amount of organisation. Larger moots are usually more organised than the smaller, in that they will have some sort of central focus to the evening. At the Northtown moot, for example, each month an individual would be invited to speak, either from elsewhere in the country, or from within the membership of the moot itself. The moot would begin with individuals chatting about topics often unrelated to Pagan religious or magical practice, as members arrived and found places to sit. Then at 9pm the central talk would begin, listened to attentively by all present. There would then be a post-talk discussion, where questions could be asked of the speaker, which usually led to further discussion in smaller groups that began speaking amongst themselves. Finally, as people left and closing time approached in the pub, the discussion would break into even smaller groups. The Westcity moot was not as formally structured, having no speaker most weeks, but it similarly was constrained by time, due to it also being held in a pub. It is possible to see that this temporal structuring of the moots is one aspect that makes this an 'event', binding each participant together in a common time and space, rather than simply a disconnected set of individuals.

¹⁷ <http://www.witchvox.com/wotw/home/england.html> presents lists of ongoing student events in Britain, although, being an American site these are called 'circles', rather than moots.

Leadership

This type of event requires organisation to bring it into existence. A venue must be established, speakers invited and publicity produced. Usually this role is taken on by one person who is the regular organisational leader of the moot. At the Northtown moot this was Jonathon, a man in his late forties, while the Westcity moot was arranged by Phillip, also of a similar age. These two individuals had been involved in Paganism since the late 1970s and early 1980s, participating in some of the first moots to have taken place in those locations. They clearly were very active in the Pagan scene, taking part in other aspects such as hosting occasional public rituals and presenting lectures or workshops at Pagan conferences. Additionally, they had both found employment in Pagan-related fields – as a tarot reader and as the owner of a small occult supplies business. At other moots attended, the pattern was much the same; the leaders of large moots were generally older than smaller moots and had a history of involvement in Paganism. This was not always the case however; on occasions where there were two or more competing moots within the same city, a moot with a long history could lose out to a newly formed one run by a younger leader. On occasions when I saw this happen, it was often the case that the venue was more convenient for transportation, the event attracted more established Pagan speakers, or more usually because the principal members – including essentially Pagan ‘celebrities’ – transferred from the old moot to the new one. This had been the case in Northtown, after a series of disagreements led to a split in the membership of one moot, who then moved to a newly re-instated moot. This conflict is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Although a defined ‘Pagan’ event, the interests of members at moots are extremely varied. At the Northtown moot, a system was set up by Jonathon to assist the communication between individuals with different backgrounds or from defined Pagan ‘traditions’ as discussed in Chapter Three. Each week he would hand out a ‘register’ booklet, where everyone was obliged to enter their name and their interests. At the first moot Jonathon explained, as he handed it around:

“Ok guys, this is something that used to be done at the original moot here all those years ago. Basically it’s a way of letting people with common interests get to know about each other. You don’t have to use your real name. So just put a name

in here, and then your interests in here.” (Extract from fieldnotes, 2001, Northtown Moot)

This speech is interesting because it explicitly presents an ideal of networking that connects individuals with ‘common interests’. Not only does Jonathon suggest that a system such as this is necessary to connect participants with each other, but in doing so he presents the assumption that commonality is important in this context. Yet within this, the expectation remains that each member is distinctly individual. Secondly, the process of overtly organising the community is apparent. The fact that Jonathon has set this system in motion illustrates that in order for this community to become more than an unconnected collection of individuals, some real, observable processes are enacted. In other words, this particular moot contains structurally organised procedure that may be in accordance with the bureaucratic rationalisation suggested by Berger (1999), in her argument that contemporary Wicca is becoming ‘routinized’. The reference to "something that used to be done at the original moot" suggests to the members a sense of continuity and history. More of this will be discussed further below, but suffice to say here that it strengthens the standing of the ‘tool’. In fact this registration system was utilised at every one of the Northtown moots over the three years of research, even when Jonathon was unavailable and another Pagan would act as stand-in organiser. A final point to note is that, in the suggestion that the use of a pseudonym is appropriate in the register, we can see something of Jonathon’s assumed identity of the Pagan community: that secrecy and suspicion is an ideal.

The Westcity moot was not as bureaucratic as Northtown. In addition to a lack of any formal registration system, defined speakers were rare, resulting in a more unstructured event. As will be shown below, this ‘structure’ or lack of it was only the surface organisation, and the moots were actually structured on a deeper level. Before exploring this theme, however, more can be said of the more obvious features of organisation. In Chapter Two, we saw some of the ways in which leadership within groups has been defined by social psychology. These accounts could all be applied to the leadership at work in the organisation of Pagan moots. After attending only a few meetings, it soon became clear that Phillip and Jonathon were effective organisers, or ‘task specialists’ (Brown, 2000). The length of time that they had been leading moots had obviously equipped them with a level of skill in dealing with venues and moot members. Another factor that placed them in positions of apparent leadership was their unremitting

participation in other moots in different cities. Without doubt, there are ‘hardcore’ moot-goers who attend several moots each month, but these are few, with most Pagans attending only one or two. Phillip and Jonathon were regulars at moots around the north of England, sometimes attending two in one week. It was clear that this gave them an advantage in that they had knowledge of a wide selection of Pagan groups, being able to comment on the internal politics and splits in each. On a very mundane but no less significant level, it also made their names known around the area, so that when, as in Jonathon’s case, they were involved in the establishment of a moot, other Pagans would know of their credentials and be more likely to attend.

Space

Beyond the basic demographics and organisational structure of the event, the first aspect that should be explored is the spatial structuring of moots. Unlike the ‘virtual’ arena of online communities discussed in chapter six, a moot is significantly constrained by space in the environment in which it is held. In an analysis of spatial relationships we could turn to a host of writers such as Simmel and his writings on social space (Baldassare, 1978), or Edward Hall’s theory of proxemics (1963) even through to Garfinkel’s disruptive experiments (1967). As we saw in Chapter One, proxemics is revitalised in Maffesoli’s (1996) account of contemporary sociality, albeit in a more theoretical form. It became clear early on that the physical nature of the moot location could easily be overlooked, but was significant in shaping interaction, via the constraints it placed upon seating arrangements. As both the Northtown and Westcity moots had relocated to different premises near the beginning of the research period, it was possible to see these spatial processes at work. Many of the participants of the moot, including myself, had to negotiate their way around an area that was new to them. In the first moots attended, people would sit with the people they already knew, seemingly in random areas. Over time, however, at each meeting it became noticeable that people would not only sit near to the same people as the previous moot, but that often they would sit in the same place in the pub. This simple observation is significant, as the positioning of members shapes, or at the very least supports the development of smaller collectives and cliques. Of the various groupings at the moots, two emerged as the strongest. The first of these revolved around two individuals, Silvia and Terence, a couple who for many years had run a Pagan shop in the city. Their apparent ‘separateness’ from the group as a whole became clear quite early on in the research, being most clear at the ‘anniversary’ moot that celebrated

thirteen years of the continuous existence of a Westcity moot. On this occasion, they entered and sat at a table in the centre of the room, far away from the organiser and I who were sat by one wall. As their friends entered, they sat down with them, never venturing to speak to the others present. The following meeting, this space was to become their habitual seating place:

At this moment Silvia and Terence enter. After walking to the bar, they enter into the back room and subsequently glance around up to the point where we are sitting, when they move towards the central table. Silvia pulls out a chair to sit down. [...] Although Phillip and the man in the raincoat are still talking, Ron and I are looking at Silvia and Terence. Eye contact is made with Ron and Silvia stops pulling out the chair. She speaks to Terence quietly, as she puts the chair back and they both walk over to the tables by the window where the rest of us are sat. (Extract from Fieldnotes, 2001, Westcity Moot)

This set of observations appears to show that Silvia was preparing to sit in the exact same location as at the previous moot, but the non-verbal interaction with Ron placed her in a difficult position where she could either ignore or acknowledge him. It was this act that drew the clique into the 'core' group, where Phillip, the main organisational leader of the moot, was sat. Once Terence and Silvia had sat within this group they were soon involved in conversation with the others, becoming part of the same group led by Steve and thereby losing their own independence. Cliques were able to select their position in the room, either to be part of a main discussion grouping, or separate from it. In this extreme example, although all members had arrived for the same event, it was as though two separate moots were to take place.

The second of the cliques that was most evident was at the Northtown moot. In the case of Silvia and Ron, based on the stilted, awkward conversation, it was possible to infer some tension between the two of them and Phillip. In the Northtown clique, the expression of difference was more subtle. One reason for this was in the use of humour in the talk between the principal participants of the intragroup split:

The BP [a Pagan organisation] coordinator for Northtown hands a leaflet to me about the BP conference, at which point Jonathon shouts across, "hey you're not advertising here!". At first I think this is a serious comment (perhaps it is), but the

coordinator responds, “might as well be something interesting going on here... not advertising, just handing out information”, and laughs. (Extract from Fieldnotes, Northtown Moot 2001)

Obviously, this interchange could have been one of explicit aggressive conflict, but instead it was a subtle humorous exchange. Jonathon’s original criticism might have had serious intentions or simply a joke, but the BP coordinator responded as though the latter. This allowed Jonathon to make his point (if that is what he intended) – that this was *his* moot – without causing loss of face for the coordinator. Thus, both participants were able to retain their moral positions (Goffman, 1959). We could assert that this interaction was actually about a conflict of interests and status. Jonathon is the organisational leader of the moot, yet the BP coordinator, who himself runs another moot in the same city, was threatening his position. By examining the seating positions of these two people, it was possible to see how in addition to expressing different positions individually, they also belonged to two cliques, seated apart. In fact Jonathon’s disapproval was given only when the coordinator left his own grouping to distribute leaflets to other moot attendees.

Contemporary Pagans in Britain have a term, ‘bitchcraft’, for conflict between individuals or cliques. It is interesting as it illustrates the reflexivity of members, in their ability to see conflict yet remain committed to the notion that they are all Pagan. Another extract from fieldnotes provides a good example:

“I see that woman from Eastham isn’t here yet then”, says Bob. Jonathon’s smile drops, he looks down to the floor. “Ahh, bitchcraft!” Bob exclaims. The bald-headed man sat next to Jonathon laughs. Jonathon, however, crosses his arms and continues looking to the floor. (Extract from Fieldnotes, 2001, Northtown Moot)

Bob’s comment about “that woman from Eastham” is about Anne, a previous moot organiser from Northtown who moved away after the new Northtown moot had begun. A great deal of hostility emerged during the research period between Bob and her and this is alluded to by Bob himself. By terming his animosity ‘bitchcraft’, he attempts to raise the conflict in humorous manner. Nevertheless, his enmity is evidently not appropriated by Jonathon, who quite plainly makes it apparent with his body language. The conflict between Bob and Anne was instigated by her desire to move out of Northtown after a split had occurred between two groups of people that used to attend her moot. According to

her, this was caused by the actions of one individual subsequent to the death of another member – a member who influenced the course of contemporary Paganism¹⁸ in the past and who along with his partner was highly respected amongst the area's Pagans. This individual, referred to frequently as “that woman” by Anne, became the centre of the split, essentially leading to two separate moots in the same area. Anne managed to sell her home and moved to Eastham, but almost immediately another moot began at a different pub in the same city. This was the Northtown moot discussed here. Anne continued to run a moot in Northtown, which involved her travelling back each month and eventually she completely settled in Eastham, effectively closing the original moot. This conflict illustrates the importance of organisers, particularly in Jonathon's swift response in setting up another moot. Nevertheless, the ghost of Anne would not go away. She was referred to several times, particularly by Bob who, evidently belonging to the opposing camp, took any opportunity to make his feelings known, as was seen in his ‘bitchcraft’ comments above. Of course, Bob's attempts to defame Anne served only to introduce her to any new members that were attending the moots and had perhaps not heard of her previously.

The small groups that formed over the initial months of the two moots in their new location soon became permanent features. Each month the same people would sit in the same positions, and although there would be some movement during the evening, this was limited. While we should note that Maffesoli's (1996) argument about the effect and integration of proxemics in contemporary community is a description of larger groups on an institutional scale, in the small setting of a pub moot, proxemics affects interaction and group behaviour. This spatial proximity denotes the collective groups within a larger event. This is not to suggest that these groups are not connected, however. Examining the ways in which individuals interact both in and across internal groupings, as given in the rest of this chapter, can illustrate the ways in which a moot with two or three groups within it, can function as one unit.

A Knowledge Space

The members of a moot talk about multiple topics over the course of an evening, some directly related to Pagan spirituality, but much of it on other topics. These themes and the ways in which they are discussed provide an insight into moot ‘community’. We have

¹⁸ Anne told me this during the course of her life-story interview, analysed in chapter six.

already seen how there is a distinct hierarchy in place at each moot, with the organiser able to define one discussion theme, via their organisation of a ‘main event’ or speaker at each meeting. At the Northtown moot it resulted in a period of discussion of the speaker’s comments after they had finished their presentation. At Westcity however, the entire evening could shift from topic to topic and, of course, several discussions would occur at the same time in different groupings. Three interlinked themes arose time and time again at every moot visited: Pagan literature, ‘practiced’ knowledge, and authentic value.

Literature/book knowledge

In Chapter Three, we saw how contemporary British Paganism, despite its emphasis on the ‘natural’, ecological and non-human, is fundamentally literature-bound. Clearly it would be an overstatement to suggest that actual Pagan practice – meaning the religious rituals and magic-working – is always done ‘by the book’. Nevertheless the influence of written texts on both the development of the religion and its present form cannot be denied. This extends beyond ritual and ceremony and into the realm of social interaction at moots. This is due to its significance in the discourses of expertise that are a feature of this context. Most obviously, the importance of Pagan literature emerges when newcomers to Paganism arrive at a moot and are introduced to other members. One of the first questions they will be asked is, “what have you read?” In the Northtown and Westcity moots, there was a complex relationship between texts needed to give sufficient knowledge to be able to display expertise, and hostility towards too much ‘book learning’ and academic research. There is a collection of ‘necessary’ texts, texts that are required if one is to understand many of the conversations spoken in the moot. This is, on a very basic level, simply because Paganism in its multiple forms has its own jargon, just as any other specialist enterprise has. For example, in a discussion about the training of new Pagans, Phillip suggested that all the information one needed could be gained from the various recent books published, some of which were discussed in Chapter Three.

It is not only the knowledge in books that is required in order to engage in moot conversations. One important aspect of membership at the moots attended is the preference for the knowledge of long-standing members of the moots, over that of academics. Yet it is interesting to note that even in cases where hostility is held towards authors, their work is expected to be read and understood by many members. Phillip was particularly keen to discuss these sorts of topics. In a discussion about historian Ronald

Hutton, from which feelings of disgust emerged about his omission of Northtown in the history of contemporary Paganism, it was clear that his book *The Triumph of the Moon* had been read by many in attendance. Indeed, if a member had not read the book, gaining access to that debate would have been extremely difficult.

Jonathon talks about the history of the moots in Northtown, and says that the place is important for the history of Paganism. He states that the very idea of a ‘moot’ came from Northtown, was then “tried in London but didn’t work”, and so was tried in the North again, “and from there it spawned”.

At this point, Phillip comments that Ronald Hutton has missed all of this, claiming that it’s a “major error in his book”. [...]

“This is all stuff that should have been included”, he says. (Extract from fieldnotes, 2001, Northtown Moot)

Usually, Hutton is a character held in high regard in the broader Pagan community. As stated in the previous chapter, he is regularly invited to speak at several Pagan conferences for example, yet this extract shows how even he is not spared strong criticism when the question of Pagan history is approached. Presumably, if a sense of history is one aspect of a strong community, then to miss out an important influence on the development of the Pagan movement is construed to be insulting and a gross error. As previously discussed, academic research and contemporary Paganism have a relationship that is complex, due in part because it is a recent developing religion, but also a literary one. Yet, as with many other ‘outsiders’, academic literature is treated with suspicion and often a mistrust of motives. This was evident at the beginning of the research in gaining access to some private rituals. The extract above suggests something of this conflict, as Jonathon and Phillip in presenting their own personal knowledge are also challenging the methodology and accuracy of historical study.

Practiced Knowledge

Book-knowledge is clearly important if one is to fit comfortably into the moot environment. Yet, despite its regular discussion, it was always held in second place to personal, ‘practiced’ knowledge. It is one thing to be able to discuss a ritual plan, but

quite another to have taken part in one. In all the moots participated in, the importance of experiential religion was emphasised frequently. Some talks would be about the practice of performing effective ritual, presented from personal experience; others were given on the different magical methods of various Pagan traditions, again with reference to the speakers own magical experiences. This is where one was able to express their expertise in a setting where it was valued. At the Northtown and Westcity moots, it also enabled individuals who were not the organisational leaders of the moot to become effective leaders within discussions. In a discussion that took place after a central talk about the use of crystals in healing, a relative beginner in Pagan ritual asked the speaker to explain more about the environmental costs of the practice. Suddenly, Frank, a long-time regular of several Northtown moots interjected:

“They should be fucking shot!” he exclaims, adding emphasis by moving his head with each word, which shakes his loose, fairly unwashed looking hair around.
“They should at least know where they come from. Of course I do use some crystals myself, but only in the making of talismans”. (Extract from fieldnotes, 2001)

In making this statement, Frank found an opportunity in the discussion to agree with the general moral position, while subsequently describing his personal experience. This interjection was beneficial to him later on in the evening, as when discussion had broken into smaller groups, two newcomers asked him for advice on using talismans in magic. In this way, we can see that moots are one avenue in which experience can be passed along without the need for books. Phillip could frequently be seen to perform a similar tactic, offering his own paranormal experiences and abilities in working magic spells.

Phillip was not the only other member to do this, and in fact a pattern can be seen in those that did regularly give accounts of their experience. The people who did this most frequently were adept at working it into different discussions, and were invariably the most well-known members at the different moots. An example could be seen in one occasion that happened at another moot, held in a city near to Northtown. At all moots there will be some amount of ‘flirting’ that goes on between members. On this occasion, just after my arrival, Judith, a forty-something year old woman of over twenty years experience in Paganism turned to me as I was sitting down and offered to ‘read my palm’. Swiftly taking my hand, she then proceeded to explain about the lines on my hand and

how they expressed virility. Explanations of each line were interspersed with statements about her own sexual preferences for men who, coincidentally looked the same as me. This act of flirting in this case both demonstrated her identity as a knowledgeable Pagan, directly showing her perceived ability, and also her identity as a sexually confident woman. Judith had combined two discourses in one act.

Authentic Value

Contemporary British Paganism, having its more recent influences in the counter-culture of the 1960s (Hutton, 1999; Hanegraaf, 1998), is in many respects aligned with the same groups that maintain an interest in folklore and 'folk' culture. Many moots are held in 'Real Ale' pubs, and this beer is also available at conferences. At these same conferences and at Pagan camps a vast range of hand made crafts are available to buy. There is an apparent emphasis on hand made products as holding more 'worth' than factory-produced items, based not on an assumption of superior manufacturing, but because of the value of the 'authentic' and the distinct. The hand-made nature of an item relates not only to its actual structure, but also to a general category of authenticity; one that is filled with notions of tradition, craftsmanship, and the genuineness of the product. In a discussion about Pagan shops, Phillip began to talk in terms of this authentic value:

"I think it's ridiculous how many are sold everywhere. I tell you what, there used to be a shop in Northtown that just sold, real, authentic American Indian things. They sold dreamcatchers - they were about twenty quid but worth it - each one had a certificate and was labelled as being made by an actual Native American"

(Phillip, extract from fieldnotes, 2002, Westcity Moot)

Here, then, we see an example of talk of value expressing two things. Phillip is evidently stating his preference that, if one is to buy an item from one specifically designated and physically located tradition, then it is worth paying more money in order to ensure it is made by the hands of those people in that location and tradition. Perhaps they have more skill in actually constructing it, or, as suggested in a further speech, perhaps they know something of the actual spiritual dimension of constructing dreamcatchers. He is also talking of authenticity, of the true, 'real' religious knowledge and identity behind the item. Something has value, precisely because it is considered to be real or authentic, in this case

because it was actually labelled as such. This authentic value is reinforced by the increase in price of the product.

It is impossible to understand the debates that took place over authenticity of tradition and associated items without viewing them within an ongoing moot discourse about the New Age. The New Age, as has been shown in other studies (Hutton, 1999; Orion, 1995), is often, even usually, linked with Paganism. For the members of the Northtown and Westcity moots however, it is an 'other', and items such as mass-produced dreamcatchers become symbols with which members define the limits of their community. This is associated with the notion of authentic Paganism as being a clearly definable tradition. The New Age is subsequently contrasted with contemporary, 'real' Paganism; it is seen as being inferior, something for the masses, even the 'easy' option:

“New Age rubbish. I tell you where the best shop in the world is”, the student continues. “You know Black Street in Northtown?”

“Yeah”, Phillip replies.

“Well there’s a shop on there that sells everything. Not the New Age stuff, but authentic stuff” (Extract from fieldnotes, 2002, Westcity Moot)

It is particularly interesting that the New Age, unlike other spiritual or religious forms is in many respects a similar culture to contemporary Paganism. In that its adherents often shop at the same shops, read similar books, and attend the same tarot conventions. In line with this, some would place the two groups as one, “cultic milieu” (Campbell, 1972). Yet, as the above extract illustrates, the New Age is often described as something less than 'true' Paganism. Despite similarities, in this case it is made extremely clear: the new age is "rubbish", while "authentic stuff", real dreamcatchers – for which we can read real authentic spirituality – is desirable. It is possible to see in these exchanges how discussions about items and practices construct a boundary between the communities.

Participation

So far the focus of this chapter has been on the 'leaders' of the moot. These are important, because they are the people who put the event in place, and are the Pagan 'celebrities' that

are known to members at other moots, due to their active travel to participate and present their knowledge. Clearly there is a correlation between the length of time they have been involved in Paganism and their position as knowledgeable members of the community. It is no coincidence that Phillip, Anne, Jonathon and Bob have been active in the period of major development of contemporary Paganism. They are part of the history of the 'movement'. Nevertheless, in order to remain in positions of high status, they have to participate actively and use all of the resources available to them, such as expressing their knowledge and current magical practices.

There are of course, a majority of 'non-leaders': members who actively take part but who are not in organisational roles or who are well known by other members either at other moots or sometimes at the same moot. Their participation is not insignificant however; they are just as important for the functioning of the event, as they are members of the cliques and small groups that combine to form the whole. How then, do these members account for their attendance at moots? What do they say they gain from the moot type of arrangement? The response of one participant, John, when asked why he had begun going to the Westcity moot, sheds some light:

'I don't know really. I just felt that I was looking for some sort of spirituality. I looked around. I'm not into all the stuff that most of the people here are into. It's more of a nature thing to me. I was looking around and I found Paganism and it felt like I was home. I can just look at nature and it's enough. Sort of meditation.'

(Extract from fieldnotes, 2002, Westcity Moot)

This account suggests that John is aware of the other member's intentions. He presents himself as being able to make an informed assessment concerning the practices of the other participants in the moot, and more significantly, expresses individuality, since John is implying that he is different from the other members of the group. Yet, in some respects he is just the same as them – "I'm not into *all* the stuff that *most* of the people here are into". This account was by no means unusual. At the same moot there was a regular member who would arrive, buy a drink, and then sit in the corner only talking to other members rarely. He was well known by the other members, despite his lack of engagement with discussion. When I asked him about his involvement, he also told me that he was not "like the others here", and that he simply enjoyed the company each month. For this man and for John, membership of the moot requires that an individual be part of,

yet paradoxically also remain ‘apart from’ the group. We can see from this that it is not possible to characterise every member as having the same experience of moots. There are different levels and types of interest, and different ways of using the event. In the language of group behaviour explored in Chapter Two, the individuals at moots, while being members of the same group, each play different ‘roles’.

Constructing History

In chapter one there was a brief discussion about the place of ‘history’ and memory in conceptualising community. Traditional community almost by its very nature demands a shared history. In the transient community of a monthly moot, history is constructed in other ways. Discussions about Pagan camps, known Pagan or New Age shops, or actual physical meetings in the past serve to create a sense of shared history. These Past Pagan events were the topic of discussion with great regularity at every moot. Members would talk about rituals that they had attended together, their experiences of Pagan camps and events that had transpired at previous moots. Some of these discussions would recall events that happened many years ago, while others would talk about notable recent happenings. One such discussion took place at the second Northtown moot, between Jonathon and some newcomers to moots. Jonathon was describing the development of the moots, and explained that the first Northtown moots had been held in the same building:

“This is the original place. It’s changed a lot since we were here; this door is new for example [pointing at the doorway that separates this room from the bar]. When we were here it was just curtains wasn’t it?” He looks to the rotund man sitting next to him.

“Oh yeah” he says. “A lot different”. (Extract from fieldnotes, 2001, Northtown Moot)

This simple and brief exchange illustrates that both members remember and actually shared some history of early moots together. Yet even if the men had not actually met before, the statement by Jonathon asking for confirmation suggests a sense of a shared past in the building. In a sense, by anchoring his description of the past to the actual physical structure of the meeting place, it becomes insignificant whether they knew each other at all: the fundamental ‘sharing’ exists in being at the same location and

experiencing it in the present. In addition to ‘actually’ existing for some members therefore – if we assume that they did share experiences together in the past – shared history is both reinforced and built in the talk. The object to which the talk revolves does not even need to be present at the time. At a Westcity moot, Phillip talked with a student about a shop that used to exist, and that both of them had shopped at before. The significant feature of the discussion was that it did not matter if they had ever been there at the same time; in fact, it is not important whether they actually entered the shop at all. The mere shared recollection – built in the conversation – provides a sense of shared history, and arguably, ‘togetherness’.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined one of the most frequent and permanent gatherings of contemporary Pagans in Britain. While Pagans may not attend the same moot for many years, most will continue to participate in moots at the same location, or if they move home, at a new location. We have seen how this continuity allows for a shared sense of history, but it has also been shown how this can in some ways be constructed in present interaction. Importantly, it has been demonstrated in this chapter that the organisational structure of a moot is hierarchical – there is usually one organiser who takes on responsibility to arrange the events and often their contents. The other members of the moot are willing to allow them to do this, because, as we have seen, not every member wishes to take on that same position. The two cases given of members who claimed to be different to other participants illustrate the complexity of a gathering like a moot, in which differing interests combine together in one space. This tension between an individualistic claim and group membership will arise time and again in the chapters to follow.

Jonathon’s registration system in place at the Northtown moot suggests that commonality is important for this community, despite the fact that in actuality the membership of the small cliques remained mixed. It suggests the instigation of a bureaucratic system and, if this were extended, it would be in accordance with some of the claims made by Berger (1999) about the rationalisation of contemporary Paganism. However, as we have seen, this was merely an explicit tool that had little effect in the present moment of a moot. It was, rather, a concrete record of the moot’s history, and although it was not referred to after the first moot, we cannot be sure of the influence it may have in the future.

It has also been shown above that the use of space and group proxemics is one contributing factor in the maintenance of ‘cliques’, or small groupings that, while remaining separate to other cliques, are in much the same way as individuals, part of the whole. The theme of conflict presented within humour is also significant, as this allows an image of togetherness to be maintained. In fact at moots, not once did I observe an aggressive argument. Rather, in times of conflict, as in the example given in this chapter with Anne, individuals are more likely to simply stop attending, or form their own moot at a different location.

Finally, the theme of two different types of knowledge – one based on literature and the other on individual experience – have been explored briefly. Knowledge and practice cannot be separated from notions of authenticity and ‘real’ Paganism. This chapter explored how within this framework, objects can be used to define a boundary between ‘us’ and ‘others’. As suggested by Cohen, they do in fact become symbols used in constructing ‘otherness’. This theme of knowledgable practice will again be raised later, as it becomes significant in its application at other contexts. In the next chapter, three of these contexts are explored.

Chapter Five: Rituals, Conferences and Camps

Introduction

In the last chapter we saw how the moot is a locale of Pagan identity and community, and some of the ways in which this is expressed and maintained in that environment. In this chapter, three other Pagan settings are examined, highlighting the processes at work within them that combine to give the groups structure and ‘togetherness’. The advantage of exploring these contexts in this manner is that the connections between them can readily be seen, and by the end of the chapter it will have become clear that the moot is but one Pagan context, and that in others, group interaction differs. This is not to say that there are not commonalities between moots and these contexts, but it is important to note how the context shapes interaction and how it therefore subsequently shapes community. The three settings examined are Pagan rituals, Pagan-oriented conferences and festivals or ‘camps’. It is not only the group processes that are at times in common; in these cases, there is an integration of the three contexts. Rituals for example are held either on their own or within conferences and camps. Finally, if one is to follow the Pagan guidebooks, these ceremonies are at the heart of the religion, but as we will see in the rest of this chapter and the thesis as a whole, this is but one aspect of an integrated set of contexts and processes.

Methodology

The methods of data collection used for this chapter are in the same vein as those used for the exploration of moots. Participant observation was used to gather a large volume of descriptive fieldnotes in the three contexts. Through contacts made at moots and via email, entry to semi-public rituals and camps were made possible. Membership of Pagan organisations allowed entry into conferences, which although were also open to the public at a higher price, were scarcely advertised outside of the organisation’s membership. During the first year of research I was able to join a private ‘coven’ of Pagans as an active participant and researcher, which gave an insight into the workings of this type of closed group. The initial rituals attended were conducted by this coven and enabled me to experience several different ritual forms in an environment where I could learn ‘as I went

along', performing my role in each, according to that which I was told to do and agreed to. It included invoking various elemental forces and guardians, 'charging' material objects with psychic power, 'travelling' to the otherworld and toasting ancient gods. As will be seen in this chapter, this learning process is something that all Pagans will do in ritual contexts. The effects of these, whether magical or psychological, were personally interesting and could be assessed in detail. This is not the purpose of this chapter however, which is to analyse the observable actions of the participants at these events. A discussion of the otherworld is given, but with a view to explicating more widely the behaviour in relation to communal process.

Rituals

If any image were to sum up the general perception of a Pagan gathering, particularly of Witches, it would be that of a magical ritual. A brief examination of the 'spirituality' shelves in a bookshop, or a search on the internet will bring forth literally hundreds of images of Witches next to boiling cauldrons, perhaps residing in glowing 'magic circles', or flying to a sabbat. Much of this imagery is generated and propagated by Pagans themselves. It is also the case that many British Pagans take part in these sorts of acts only rarely, spending much of their 'Paganism' in moots or online. Despite this, rituals cannot be ignored as they are very clearly an important part of the culture of Paganism. Rituals are conducted by small private Pagan groups or 'covens'; they are publicly held at seasonal times of the year, and are also a component of much solitary Pagan practice. It is group ritual that concerns us here however, giving an insight into the micro-social action that helps to build those groups at that 'moment' when members work together. We can assert this, because many rituals are named by the organisers as being 'open', that is, open to the public. This means that there will be some participants who have not met before, or who have at the very least not performed magical acts together. In these contexts, a certain amount of work must be done by all present to make the ritual successful. This 'work' – and British Pagans often call rituals, 'workings' (Beth, 1990; Farrar, 1981; Rhyll, 1993) – is to create effective magic, but in common with the themes of this thesis, it also relates to boundary and community. Additionally, as will be explicated in this section, the study of the work of Pagan rituals also presents us again with another aspect of Pagan communal process, that of humour and play.

Conceptualising Ritual

It is possible to understand ‘ritual’ in many ways. This is not merely a methodological claim; in fact, Pagan literature itself defines ritual in multiple ways, depending on the purpose: for example whether for worship or magic. Pagan academics have highlighted the importance of ritual in Pagan practice (Adler, 1986; Luhrmann, 1989; Orion, 1995), but have devoted little space to defining this term, presumably in the assumption that it is clear from the outset. Fieldwork conducted for this chapter demonstrated that this assumption can be questioned, and that a common understanding by the participants of what ‘ritual’ is, was far from the case. In one ritual attended, for example, four of the six present had very little idea about the structure of much common Pagan ceremony, learning their roles and the physical movements as the celebratory rite progressed. This illustrates that not only are there differing levels of ‘ability’ for want of a better word, but also that ritual itself is not necessarily a fixed ordered event. While it is the case that these events would contain elements common to all, many of these elements would not be out of place in any other religious context. The ‘ability’, of the participants to craft a collective magical act, is of course related to the knowledge one can gain from books, teachers, and at events such as conferences, camps and other rituals. The ritual is the space where this knowledge is subsequently put into practice with others who will also have differing familiarity with the structure and method.

There is, however, another way in which ritual can be conceptualised. This is the non-religious, smaller, social ‘rituals’ described by Goffman in his studies of everyday interaction (Goffman, 1956, 1959, 1967). The fact that these types of ritual are not religious does not deter from their importance. Goffman wrote that, “...in one sense this secular world is not so irreligious as we might think. Many gods have been done away with, but the individual himself stubbornly remains as a deity of considerable importance” (Goffman, 1956:499). These small inter-personal rituals, as in any social situation, should be expected to be present in the context of a Pagan ritual. Detailed observation might be able to uncover these attempts by individuals to uphold their moral character, and make their interactions throughout the Pagan ritual flow smoothly. Where we might want to depart from Goffman’s approach is by beginning with the assumption that these rituals are somehow ‘known’ as a tacit knowledge in the minds of individuals, or more specifically that an external moral order constrains the individuals in the interaction. Nevertheless, ritual of this type was seen in the Pagan contexts studied. For example, when rituals were

held at someone's home, all the invited participants complemented the owner about the state of the house. This is not unusual of course, it is a common practice to give complements when visiting others' homes, the only difference here was that the comments always referred to the 'Pagan' interior decoration – individuals complemented the owners about their altars, or home-made seasonal items hanging on the walls. We could argue that the individuals were able to say something of their identity, while upholding their everyday moral presentation. Yet, this would rest upon an assumption of their 'everyday' moral position.

We can draw a parallel with Goffman's (1959) advice to his readers in the concluding pages of his book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. He states that we should beware of applying our own cultural assumptions to different cultures – different nationalities in his example. Differing cultures may hold dissimilar views about what a morally adequate individual is like, but the fundamental point is that moral selves and moral order exist despite these differences in content. In the context of Pagan ceremony, we can focus not on the nature of the morality in social rituals, but the way in which these rituals create order out of potential chaos: whatever their 'hidden' intention is. As an illustration, in looking more closely at Pagan rituals as defined by Pagans themselves, several key observations can be made. The first of these is that even when there has been no planning beforehand, other than to arrange a meeting place, a ritual can be formed and enacted that appears to fulfil the requirements of the participants. The question must be posed: how is this possible? Even with the knowledge that Pagan literature provides suggestions for ritual, it is a feat that agreement can be found in a short time, and that a 'spiritual' experience can be had. In one sense, it is not surprising that out of the myriad of Pagan traditions, one 'default' ritual form emerges as the most predominantly used. In several of the rituals attended, the basic structure was the same, following Wicca, the most easily accessible and familiar tradition. It is as though in public or semi-public rituals Wicca serves as something of a 'lingua franca', a common format that even relative newcomers can follow. Consider the first ritual attended for this research. It was a celebration held at Halloween and began with the organiser stating:

'Ok, this is just going to be a basic Wiccan style ritual. We'll call the quarters and invoke the Lord and Lady. Then, well I'm not sure what will happen. So, who wants to invoke the quarters?' (Charlotte, extract from fieldnotes 2000)

Charlotte had obviously taken on the role of leader, informing us of the deities and structure to be used. Even those present, who practiced entirely different Pagan traditions, including Odinism and Druidism that have dissimilar ritual forms, were able to follow this ceremony. After informing Charlotte that this was the first time they had done a Wiccan ritual, they were nevertheless able to quickly decide which 'quarter' they would invoke and follow the format. This ritual eventually became a series of role-plays in which the participants 'travelled' to the 'underworld' and conversed with deceased relatives.

In other rituals, such as those held at camps, it was also the case that newcomers to Pagan ritual could join in without disrupting the general flow. In some cases participants told me that they had previously read of Wiccan ritual in Pagan literature, but others who had never done this were still able to follow what was happening and participate. These 'open' rituals were particularly interesting in this regard, as they were occasions when it was possible to see how quickly individuals would enact the expected action, even with no prior knowledge of it. For example, in these cases, the general ritual was coordinated by one leader, the 'priest' or 'priestess', who would do the majority of the speaking, invoking of deities and magical 'charging' of objects. They would stand in the centre of a circle, formed by the others present and would ask for four people to invoke the elemental forces, people who in all those I attended would be experienced Pagans. There was always one point however where the other participants were required to actively take part. Near the end of the ceremony, some celebratory food and drink would be passed around the circle, person to person. With each exchange of the dish or cup, the giver would say a phrase, often "blessed be" or "may you never thirst". The receiver would then, in the first case, repeat, "blessed be" while taking the food or drink. In the second case however, they would say nothing as they were given the item. These are undoubtedly 'ritual utterances' (Hutchby and Woofitt, 1998) in both their religious connotation and their regularity. The receiver would in every case follow the same pattern as set by the previous speakers. We may stretch the analysis to consider these examples to be 'adjacency pairings' (Silverman, 1998), as they are pairs of connected utterances. The first utterance appears to require a response, or at least its 'preferred response' (Hutchby and Woofitt, 1998) seems to be a repetition of the phrase. Yet, because of the lack of further data – all that is given in the ritual is a selection of individuals repeating the action of the pair before them – it is difficult to extend this claim. It is possible to at least observe the regularity with which these responses were in agreement with each other, and how it fits the context of the ritual, from comparisons with the available Pagan literature.

These sorts of normative ritual action were not limited to talk. At the same open rituals the participants would perform similar actions with their bodies. For example, when invoking the four elements, the member speaking would turn to the appropriate direction and call for the energies or spirits to enter the magic circle. At times they would simultaneously gesticulate or hold a static position, such as placing their arms in the air, while calling the invocation. Without exception, when they did this, many of the other members would assume the same position. While not every member did this, unquestionably the majority did so. Another example occurred at the end of one ritual that was held at a Pagan camp. The intention given for the ritual was to invoke the deities of the area to protect the campsite and to give their blessings to the weekend's forthcoming events. After the sharing of cake and wine the leader of the ritual told all present that he hoped they would enjoy the camp. This, however, did not signal the end of the ritual clearly, leading to a lengthy pause until someone began clapping. The clapping soon became applause and then people dispersed. We can see that on this occasion, the ritual was in need of some indication that it had ended and applause fulfilled that role. In Pagan literature this type of action is not suggested at all, but we can suggest that a member drew on their other experiences of events and their appropriate 'finishing' signs. This was then adopted by the others present, thus finalising the ritual structure.

The examples given so far illustrate the way that ordered interactions can occur in a ritual setting when some of the participants are not practiced in that context. Nevertheless, the obvious factor in both of the rituals described so far is that they were under the direction of one dominant leader. We might expect that an environment such as this would create a certain level of coherence, based on the group behaviour studies discussed in Chapter Two. Interestingly, with the gift of hindsight this also gives some insight into the sort of tensions that, more often than not, may cause Pagan groups to split or fragment. Several months after the first ritual was performed and the group had fallen apart, Charlotte, who had uttered the words in the extract on page 85 after assuming the role of leader for the night, was excluded from another female only ritual group because some of her previous co-members believed she had been a bit too keen on the role. Evidently, elevating oneself to the role of leader brings its own risks and responsibilities.

All rituals are not so centrally organised however, some having no assigned leader at all. These are often held by groups that meet only rarely to do ritual, or on occasions when

there is no time for detailed preparation. This was the case in one of the rituals that I attended in 2001. It was held in celebration of a Full Moon by a group of seven acquaintances who lived in the same city and who had originally met each other through their interest in Paganism. The time and meeting place of the ritual had been arranged quickly, after one of the members informed the others of the upcoming Full Moon. No other planning had taken place, with all being decided on the actual day of the ceremony. In analysing the event two components can be seen to be important to the members; these were magic and play.

Magic and the Otherworld

A discussion of Pagan ritual cannot be complete without a brief examination of one particular aspect, that of the importance of the 'magic' within the acts. Several authors have analysed Pagan magic in some detail, but from differing perspectives. Luhrmann (1989) for example emphasises the significance of rationality in the magician's use of magic, suggesting essentially that members psychologically 'trick' themselves into believing that their magic has the effects they claim, and that they use similar linguistic devices in duping others. Pearson (2002) has criticised this analysis, suggesting that Luhrmann should have been more reflexive in her approach to the actual effects of Magic, asking the question of how Luhrmann is able to be 'objective' while the magicians are not. Other authors have avoided these difficulties by remaining on more familiar sociological or psychological territory, such as Reid (1996) who, utilising the research of Rabinovich (see Rabinovich, 2000), suggests that practicing magic can be therapeutic for Pagan survivors of abuse. Several expositions have been given presenting the cosmological structures and ethical positioning of Pagans using magic (Orion, 1995; Clifton, 1996; Greenwood, 2000), but by far the most common recent academic treatment given to magic in ritual has been in its relationship to self-identity. Berger (1999) for example suggests that rituals are psychological tools that help to change the self in accordance with the shifting nature of late modernity:

Rituals are in part organized around changing the self, in relationship to changes that are occurring in the individual's life trajectory and in terms of changes within the larger society. (Berger, 1999: 29)

This assessment is certainly valid for some Pagan ritual in Britain, particularly those of formally established magical groups. The ritual conducted by Charlotte described previously would comfortably fit within Berger's analysis, marking the passage of time for members in an otherwise hectic life. Additionally, in coming to terms with the death of her grandmother, one member said that it had been a very therapeutic experience. Nevertheless, therapy like this seems to be hardly as dramatic in changing the 'self' as Berger's evaluation suggests. It can be seen that this view of magic in ritual has remained the predominant one in more recent research published since Berger's book. Greenwood (2000) focuses in great depth on the use of the otherworld in magic, stating that it is an important element of Pagan practice because it is viewed by the practitioners to be "a holistic healing space from the everyday world where the magician can contact his inner world and the wider forces and energies of the cosmos" (Greenwood, 2000:33). Pike (2001) has echoed this sentiment by suggesting that a definition of magic that contains all its meanings is that it is

a method of consciously separating oneself from the world of the everyday and moving into a realm where possibilities are open for physical or psychological transformation. (Pike, 2001: 13)

An examination of the rituals observed by these authors might lead us to reach the same conclusions as they have. Notably, these events appear to have been highly organised affairs, designed prior to their action in order to have the fullest magical 'effect'. The participants in these texts claim that the rituals have results in transformations. In the introduction to her book, Pike mentions the extensive planning that is behind these large public rituals. So, what of the full moon ritual and others like it, where the only planning had been to gather the participants together in one place? The following fieldnotes extracts present the ritual, how it came to be structured and the use of magic within it. All the participants were between the ages of 19 and 40 years old with varying degrees of interest and experience in Paganism. The notes begin after the members have arrived and a location has been decided upon, due principally to it having a "green" expanse of grass and woodland. We are standing in a loosely formed circle:

"So what are we going to do?" I ask.

Olivia states that she's used to working solitary and isn't used to having to organise a

group. Meanwhile she is laying out a silk headscarf on the ground to serve as the altar. David puts 2 bottles of wine on it and some bought cakes. Paul goes over to the rush and pulls some flowers (willow herb?) to place on the altar. Helen tells him that “it’s nice”. She then suggests that we make it a healing ritual as her leg hurts, and Olivia has hurt hers too. Delyth adds that her back is painful.

Then Olivia says, “I think there’s enough heartache in this circle to give some healing for the world” and everyone agrees. “I suggest using moon-healing energy”.

My suggestion is that we make a “moon-healing space”, somewhere where we can step into and be healed. It’s agreed that this is a good idea, Olivia proposes that we find things to make it with, so we separate to look for materials.

Bringing back some large branches with David we find that the “moon-portal” (Olivia’s term, she apologises for watching too much Sci-fi as a child) is almost built. It is an ellipse with small feathers and petals inside that look like snow, or perhaps stars. Twigs line its outline and a line of stones on either side makes a ‘gateway’ finished off by the branches collected by David and myself.

We gather in the centre of the circle and discuss the structure of the ritual. Helen suggests we call quarters. Delyth suggests we raise energy by chanting. Olivia says she’ll lead a spiral dance, and we agree to spiral out from the circle and enter back into the circle through the moon-portal, being anointed on the way in as proposed by Olivia who has brought some oil. There is some debate about a chant to use while spiralling, but we agree to make one up. Helen suggests using “mother of the moon” and the final chant ends up being:

“Celine, mother of the moon, shine your healing light (Delyth had said this is the moon-phase of Celine, an aspect of Hecate.) “Celine, mother of the moon, bless us here tonight”.

Helen has created most of the chant, but the others quickly agree.

The ritual goes smoothly. We designate quarters – Olivia accidentally calls water for the east, making us have 2 waters and no air, but although there are some laughs, it

doesn't seem to matter to anyone, least of all her when we talk after the ritual. Olivia's evocation is powerful and poetic. Helen's is straight out of a Garderian textbook. I decide to try to be humorous (it was well received last time) and sing "fire". Delyth attempts to be poetic but fluffs the lines and makes it short. Paul lights a candle on the altar. The spiral dance snakes around for about 5 minutes outside the circle, as we all attempt to fit the chant together. It takes a long time to get any rhythm and synchronisation, but eventually it is flowing quite well before it lulls, rises again and then we stop in front of the gate way. Olivia anoints everyone and is finally anointed by Patricia. People step into the portal after anointed and stand there for a few seconds before moving into the circle. Olivia has brought a bottle of milk and has placed it just after the portal – everyone drinks from it and agrees to sit to share the food. (Extract from Fieldnotes, 2001)

In presenting this lengthy description of a ritual it is possible to see how various disparate elements combined to form a ceremony that was seemingly meaningful for the participants. Reid (1996) has noted that the majority of rituals given in Pagan texts are for healing of some kind. It is interesting to see how in the case above, what began as a healing ritual for individuals was shaped into a more 'global' intent. This could point towards contemporary Paganism's apparent compatibility with late modernity as presented in Giddens' concept of 'life politics': found in decisions to take up environmental concerns to create, "harmonious human coexistence on the global level and psychologically rewarding self-actualisation on the personal plane" (Giddens, 1991: 223). Certainly Berger (1999) would agree with this assumption, as noted, herself suggesting that Wiccan rituals are linked with the social changes of late modernity. Yet here we can see how it was only one member who stressed this magical intention. The magical aspect of this ritual appears to have been more inclined towards the self-development of members. Nevertheless, many of the rituals attended did combine both self-healing and healing 'for the earth', so the late modern 'life politics' theory cannot be discounted.

There is one aspect that cannot be ignored in these events and that is the requirement for members to 'learn'. As previously noted, we cannot assume that participants in a ritual already know the structure and practice of that event. Nearly all studies of contemporary Paganism have described the importance assigned to 'study' in becoming an effective magician. Luhrmann (1989) suggests that it is within this learning process that the 'epistemological shift' occurs, thereby allowing magicians to believe in their actions.

Reid (1996) has also described briefly some of the training techniques used by Pagans, including meditation and visualisation. It is clear that Ritual is a space where the knowledge one has gained from this training and Pagan literature can be expressed in the presence of others directly. As we have seen in the previous chapter, this same literature provides topics for conversation and opportunities for positioning oneself as knowledgeable at moots. In a ritual context, such as that given above, this knowledge becomes applied as the magic is enacted. Sabina Magliocco has written that Pagan ritual is

... not strongly fixed, but fluid; while it is built around a basic framework... it is subject to constant innovation and variation according to the personalities of the individuals involved, their moods and desires, the time of year, and multiple other factors. (Magliocco 1996: 95)

Arguably, in addition to being affected by these factors, this is also an occasion where one's Pagan 'identity', in the shape of a Pagan tradition, can be expressed. The choice of god or goddess and the manner in which one refers to them will give the others present an impression of one's Pagan background. In the full moon ritual it was these varying sets of knowledge from the members that combined to form the content of the event. The chant, for example, came from Helen's understanding that one symbolic image of the moon is as mother (Farrar, 1981). These sorts of expressions of knowledge would appear to require a reciprocal understanding in order for them to function as a structuring force. Yet, in the ritual above, and all others like it that I attended, even when participants had differing understanding, consensus of sorts was reached and the structured ritual became formed. It appears that with the exception perhaps of the widely known Wiccan format, it is the act of members working towards a common goal – that of a functioning ritual – that makes the event work. This is not explanation enough of course; invoking the concept of 'consensus' does not explore how the members' differences of opinion is addressed and resolved. In order to understand this more fully, further aspects of Pagan ritual behavior need to be examined.

The first key observation is not so immediately apparent in the example given but can be seen in it nevertheless. In the last chapter there was a brief exposition of one way in which conflict at moots can be resolved. It was suggested that in times of discord, the common 'rule' invoked was that personal experience should be respected. The same

process can be seen to function at rituals with regard to the knowledge that a member holds. Greenwood (2000) has suggested that one of the most important functions of Pagan ritual is that the traversing between this world and the ‘otherworld’ gives rise to knowledge. She states that

[o]pening up to otherworldly reality is a process that requires learning to interpret one’s being within the wider magical whole – learning to see connections between the planetary forces and the self. (Greenwood, 2000: 31).

The knowledge that one gets from magical contact with the otherworld, whether in personal rituals or in group rituals, can therefore be understood as ‘self-knowledge’. It is, or according to Greenwood’s account it should be, a learning process whereby one gains skill in understanding the cosmos and oneself. In the Halloween ritual, as already stated, one member found it therapeutic. The full moon ritual allowed the participants to experience conversing with ‘energies’ in the spiral dance and subsequently in the healing space. Interestingly, at no time did any member ask the others to give evidence of the effects of the ritual or how they were magically affected. There appeared to be the unspoken assumption that to ‘do’ the ritual was enough to be satisfactory.

The second observation is that not every member takes part in the decision-making process. In organized rituals such as those held at large gatherings or private events like Charlotte’s Halloween ritual, it is usually the leader or leaders who have arranged at least some of the structure beforehand. In rituals that have little prior organization some members will assume the role of organizer: Helen, Olivia and Delyth in the full moon ceremony for example. There is a division of labor as individual participants will take on different roles. In the full moon celebration, two of the three organizers had brought along materials for the ritual itself, and Delyth had brought food to share at the end; she also suggesting the chant. These three took on the task of arranging the ritual while the other members, including myself, essentially followed them. This point will be addressed more fully later in this chapter as it is common to all three contexts, particularly arising at camps. Before this, a final process that structures ritual will be discussed; that can be understood as ‘negotiated play’.

Negotiated Play

When one first participates in Pagan ritual, it immediately becomes apparent how important the use of imagination and visualization is. The training that many Pagans do revolves around the ability to visualize energies and deity-forms (Adler, 1986; Carpenter, 1996; Orion, 1995) and these abilities are then put into practice in magic and contacting the underworld (Farrar, 1990; Crowley, 1994). Luhrmann (1989) saw this as an aspect of acting out fantasies, of doing ‘serious play’ as she labeled it, suggesting that

the shift from interpreting like a civil servant to interpreting like a magician may be similar in type to the shift in and out of ‘let’s pretend’ play – except that some of the play-claims are also serious assertions about the world. (Luhrmann, 1989:360)

This was then used in her text to argue that the same ambiguity over what is real and unreal in ‘play’ affords the magician an ambiguity in the reality of their magic, and therefore enables greater flexibility in the arguments they put forward to support their magical claims. The difficulty with utilizing this line of reasoning is that it can only present problems in defining one’s own position over what the ‘real’ reality is. It is never clear where exactly Luhrmann positions herself, other than her claim that the magicians she studies are deluded. A more useable understanding of play in contemporary Paganism has been put forward by Pike (2001). This definition of play is also ‘serious’, but in her case it is “serious playing with the self” (Pike, 2001: 182) that is the analytical focus. Pike’s argument is that Pagans play with their own identities, particularly at festivals, where they are able to explore hidden aspects to themselves. This self-exploration includes sexuality and gender-play, journeys into animal aspects and regressions into childhood. This is of course an opportunity for more self-therapy as individuals are able to play with roles and discover their hidden identities.

In the rituals I attended, this sort of playfulness emerged in varying degrees. On some occasions, such as at the camps discussed later in this chapter, the childlike ‘make-believe’ was very evident. Yet at most Pagan rituals, play is less obvious, but no less important in its role in the ritual process. Another examination of the full moon ritual given here as an example illustrates that participants in rituals may be playful in their performance of magic, and that, unlike many other religious forms, this is not disapproved of. One benefit of this aspect of play is that it is possible to make mistakes without fear of reprisals. During the ritual Delyth made mistakes in her invocation, for example, but this in no sense evoked any sense of hostility or rejection. Instead the ritual continued with Paul

seemingly spontaneously lighting a candle on the altar. This subsequent act, however, illustrates a very important point. Playfulness does not equate with irreverence or lack of seriousness. The members of a ritual are able to negotiate their way around a ritual context, structuring an event that contains humour and a sense of play and improvisation while continuing to work towards the ritual intention. Paul's lighting of the candle was symbolically meaningful to him, just like Olivia's 'moon portal' was to her. Using their own knowledge they added elements of play and ceremony together and negotiated a ritual format. At other rituals the processes were the same, and sometimes more apparent. In the Halloween ritual for example, it was possible to see that although there would be playful humour at times, during invocations every member stood quietly and contemplatively. It illustrates that it is not possible to characterize Pagans as always conducting rituals in the same manner, but we can assert that a playful approach to ritual performance does not reduce the meaning of the event for many.

Pagan Conferences

Throughout the year various Pagan associations hold annual conferences. These may be regional or national and vary in size. A feature of the larger conferences, such as the Pagan Federation Annual Conference, is the high level of security at the entrance to dissuade troublemakers – usually construed as evangelical Christians. Smaller regional conferences rarely have such security measures, perhaps as they are not so widely advertised in the public domain, or simply due to the fact that they, unlike the National conference, are not held in the capital. Conferences are events that combine the ability to hear individuals give presentations about various traditions and magical practices. There are also opportunities for visitors to buy Pagan items and take part in rituals and workshops. These events are held in rented halls or hotels and are attended by less than a hundred to over a thousand people¹⁹. In a search of literature, no research was found that analysed Pagan conferences, yet they are another series of events, along with moots and camps that makes up the calendar of many British Pagans.

Conferences of this type were not possible until the wider community of self-defining Pagans grew during the 1980s and 1990s. A 'conference' may initially appear to be discordant with a religion that has been heavily influenced by 1960s counterculture and so

¹⁹ Pagan Federation [accessed September 2003] <http://www.paganfed.demon.co.uk>

would perceivably be contrary to the ‘establishment’. These conferences are not part of academia, however; they are organised by Pagan associations, but invite both academics and ‘prominent’ pagans, namely published authors, whether this is in academic journals, Pagan magazines or on the internet. For example, the programme for the 2003 annual conference lists speakers such as Margot Adler, an author who produced one of the first studies of contemporary Paganism, and several other academics talking about pagan-related subjects, including archaeological finds and anthropological research into the use of psychoactive plants. These talks are intermixed with presentations by non-academic Pagans, discussing methods of making home-made wine, the art of storytelling and the role of the ‘working couple’ in Wiccan magic. The combination of academic and non-academic presentations is one aspect that distinguishes Pagan conferences from academic conferences on the topic of Paganism, such as “Paganism in Contemporary Britain” conference held at Newcastle University in 1994. Despite this, the structure of the conference is not dissimilar to many academic or business conferences, with various ‘streams’ and panel sessions included in the organisation.

Celebrity and Charisma

It is possible to see at these conferences that the speakers, while often being published authors, are additionally well known by many Pagans for other reasons. The true ‘academics’ there – the speakers who work in universities or who possess doctorates – are usually those who have been seen in television documentaries. If not this, then they will have published texts that are more accessible to the wider public readership. The other speakers present illustrate the trend that a distinct cross-over exists between the other contexts studied here; moots, Pagan camps and public rituals. In particular, the organisers of moots or individuals who regularly give presentations in that setting will also give presentations at conferences. In smaller regional conferences these will be well-known Pagans in the region; in the regional conference near Northtown and Westcity for example, Phillip and Jonathon gave workshops. The national conferences are occasions where nationally or internationally famous Pagans present speeches. At one large regional conference attended in 2001, this theme of Pagan celebrity became extremely clear.

The conference was attended by over a hundred people and was took place in several rooms of a large converted theatre. When a participant walked past the main entrance they were greeted by three people at a desk collecting tickets. There was no other security in

evidence, but this conference had only been advertised at moots or in the association's own magazine. Immediately after this entrance was the main hall, the space where the speakers would present. Behind this was the 'marketplace' consisting of a room of stalls and displays of Pagan wares for sale. The conference began with an introduction by Bob, the member from the Northtown moot. He was well received by the audience, some of whom I had seen at the Northtown moot previously. This was followed by a presentation about the various meanings of the Tarot cards, followed by a guided meditation in which we were to visualise a card, then imagine entering a door and walking into a "beautiful landscape". We can see this experience as a sharing of the knowledge and expertise that the speaker had gained from their reading of literature and practice at travelling to the otherworld. The manner in which she spoke was as an equal member. She had begun by informing us that this was her first time to present at a conference, and ended by saying, "right, well I hope it's been interesting for you, and I hope that you'll get as much out of the Tarot as I have".

Not all presenters were so egalitarian. At this conference it was possible to see several Pagan 'celebrities', but none had more status than Janet Farrar, one of the authors who had been a significant element in the development of modern Wicca. Her books and those written with her former husband are still staple reading for many new Pagans. This raises the issue that status is a multifaceted process. As we have seen, in the micro-context of moots, individuals are able to position themselves in authoritarian roles. At the conference however, the significance of the wider Pagan 'movement' comes into play. Much of the literature of Paganism emanates from Pagan celebrities, such as Janet Farrar. The very fact that she was on the stage of this conference, and indeed had star billing on the advertisement, attested to her status, and in her speech she made reference to this very aspect of the community. In discussing the internal splits and 'politics' of Paganism in its development, Janet said,

"a well known Witch from Sheffield wrote a letter to a well known Witch from Brighton and called her a C. U. N. T" (Extract from Fieldnotes, Northern Conference 2001)

The significant point about this is that her assertion assumed that the audience knew of these people. There was no subsequent explanation of whom exactly the "well known witch from Sheffield" was or that in Brighton. In my subsequent discussion with some

members of the audience, she had proven to have made the correct assumption. The individuals that I spoke to had been involved in Paganism for more than one year, and all knew exactly who Janet was talking about. It is clear that her speech also enabled Janet to expose secretive information, thereby increasing her position as a true ‘insider’; yet this insider status was essentially to be part of a Pagan elite rather than an equal member.

Greenwood (2000) has suggested that, “The secret otherworld can form the basis of a strong emotional attachment between magicians” (Greenwood, 2000: 25); in other words one’s experience of the other world will only be shared with those close enough to ‘understand’ it, being magicians themselves. This could in theory be the basis for shared commitment to each other. While there appears to be some reliability to this assertion – in the Halloween ritual for example, after travelling to the underworld, the member who had been most affected by it informed the others of her experience. In the case of the Pagan ‘celebrity’ on stage, this ‘sharing’ is in only one direction. Berger (1999) emerged with a similar analysis where, following Weber’s (1965) classic work on the religion and routinization, she claims that there is less room in today’s society for charismatic leadership. Yet she still asserts that it is celebrities of the same type as Farrar that help to shape the Pagan community, via the influence on Pagan organisations. We have seen how it is indeed the case that their contributions to the Pagan ‘canon’ and continuing authorship of influential literature have an effect on the body of knowledge from which members may draw. In the context discussed here, however, it is difficult to see how any shaping takes place on a micro-social scale; the unequal nature of the setting, with a celebrity on stage ‘telling’ the audience about their prescription for Paganism, does not allow for any subtle shaping to occur. In fact, the members of the audience seated around myself were far from being impressed with Janet’s speech. And a claim that she made later in her talk, which suggested that the best direction in which Pagan organisation in Britain could move is “towards America”, was rejected outright with vocal objections from the audience. As we have seen at moots, and now also at Pagan conferences, celebrity and fame can be seen to be a part of Pagan discourse, in both a national and local context, but this is not to say that celebrities have instant and dominant power.

Trade

At this regional conference, workshops and speeches were all conducted in the central hall, but as mentioned, conferences consist of more than this. An important component of

Pagan conferences is the space made for buying and selling of Pagan wares. At this event, to the rear of the main hall, an entire room was filled with market stalls. Conference participants were browsing amongst the various items on display, trying on velvet clothing or attempting to play imported djembe drums. After a perusal of the items on offer, a common theme emerges. The majority of products being sold are either made by the seller, or imported 'home-made' crafts. There are hand-carved walking sticks, hand-painted cups and plates with Pagan symbols on them, hand-sewn pieces of clothing. The conference then, was an environment where the 'natural' and 'authentic' items that Pagans own can be purchased. In the previous chapter we saw how these items can be used in conversation to evoke a boundary; at a conference they exist materially.

In this text so far the physical elements of Paganism have been relatively ignored, with the exception of moot proxemics. In the community as formed at a conference, and as we will see at camps, this would be to miss out something of exceptional importance: the dress of members, Pagan items, and the material setting of Pagan environments. In this regard, we may begin by seeking out defining physical markers of Pagan identity. But is it really possible to find homogeneity in this sense? Luhrmann (1989) falls into this trap herself when she states that although all types of individual are attracted to magic, one form of it, 'chaos magic', appeals to "heavy metal motorcyclists without means" (Luhrmann, 1989: 31). It would be possible to suggest that Pagan markers may include long or dyed hair, or an adornment of black leather, but these alone cannot be used to 'recognise' a Pagan, and in fact many Pagans do not fit this description at all. One observation we can make, however, is that comments about 'Pagan appearance' are made by Pagans themselves. Speaking at the same conference, Janet Farrar told about the earlier days of the growth of Wicca – in which she restated she played a central part – pointing to herself and saying that, "This is how we all used to dress in those days. We wanted to *look* like Witches" (fieldnotes, 2001). A suggestion is made therefore that there *is* some ideal type of 'Witch' appearance. In her case it would be someone who wears black flowing clothes, a manifestation of a common witch stereotype. As seen at this conference, both appearance and items on sale can be seen as markers of Pagan belonging, but yet again it is in the talk that these are presented as symbols of the boundary between Pagans and non-Pagans.

Pagan Camps

Seen in terms of content, there is an obvious link between Pagan conferences and festivals, known more commonly in Britain as Pagan ‘camps’. These are gatherings of often up to several hundred people who, over the course of a weekend or longer, will camp together and take part in Pagan talks, workshops and rituals, similar to a conference. The central difference is that camps involve living out in ‘nature’ at the same time. Berger (1999) has stated that events such as these constitute the most visible way that contemporary American Pagans build their communities. For her they are a hub where the content of Paganism can be spread from one group to another. Pike (2001) has come to similar conclusions in her study, which is dedicated to this phenomenon, suggesting that Pagan festivals are places where identities are played with and communities are created. The heart of her book is an exploration of the Pagan festival as “a place apart” separated from the everyday world, where whole Pagan families are created, sometimes literally, and individuals shed their mundane selves (Pike, 2001:24). Adler (1986), writing before these studies in the revised edition of her book, also describes how the festival is an extremely important part of contemporary Paganism:

Festivals have completely changed the face of the Pagan movement [...] Festivals have created a national Pagan community, a body of nationally shared chants, dances, stories, and ritual techniques. (Adler, 1986:422)

This sentiment is reinforced by Orion (1995), who states that these types of festival gatherings are uniquely American. This is certainly a persuasive position to take, as a comparison of British Pagan camps and the descriptions of festivals held in the United States certainly present prominent differences. It is also convincing because elements of American Festival ‘culture’ are beginning to change the nature of British camps, a fact that is discussed in depth at post-camp moots. Festivals may doubtless be an emotional and moving experience for many American Pagans, a space where, as Pike argues, the Pagan self is created. While it is true that participants in British Pagan camps might enjoy a similar sort of experience, including the creation of temporary yet powerful bonds within ritual, the differences between Britain and American Pagan forms are great. Although UK festivals are certainly ‘out of the ordinary’ – a liminal transitional space (Pike, 1996) – they hardly match the American Festivals in scale or structure. Nevertheless, the experiences that Pagans get from these events can of course be similar. Berger argues that Festivals are enjoyable and meaningful because they are an opportunity for Pagans who, while in their mundane lives have not declared their religious affiliation, in that setting are

able to be open about their spirituality. “They therefore enjoy being in a group in which they are practicing the “state religion” even for a short time” (Berger, 1999: 75). In the life-story interviews collected for this thesis and discussed in Chapter Seven, many interviewees stated that one aspect of the pleasure of going to camps is that they can relax and be themselves. This sentiment was summed up by an interviewee when asked what had brought her to a camp:

“I like the sense of community there. It’s a very supportive environment. I can feel the love, and it’s nice to know that you’re not alone. Even though there’s people from many different paths, it still feels like we’re together” (Jennie, August, 2002)

It is clear that Jennie found camps to be sympathetic places where she could relax. I interviewed her shortly after we had met at a summer camp. A brief exploration of this event, the *Astarte Camp* can expose the processes at work in this context.

The *Astarte Camp* is an annual event held over one weekend on several acres of land belonging to a working farm. This has been the location of the camp since the farm that had accommodated it previously was sold to less Pagan-friendly owners. Although this new location is extremely well-liked by many attendees, some of the older Pagans continue to feel affection for the previous site. Interestingly, the move has meant that in some respects this once small event now more closely resembles the festival model presented by Pike (2001). The most striking similarity relates to her discussion of ancestor shrines, which are constructed by the festival participants and thenceforth revisited at each subsequent festival. Prior to the move, there were no real opportunities to erect any permanent structures that could serve as physical memories for the members, but in the new location, the farmer – a Pagan himself – has worked with other local Pagans to construct a stone circle. During my first fieldwork session at the 2000 camp, many of us attending were called upon to erect the first of these stones. All the official rituals can now be enacted within the circle, and at the camp attended, individual Pagans would speak about the connection they felt with that physical structure. The site also has a natural spring around which a small altar has been erected. Small offerings have been left at this place, tied to the surrounding trees and placed around the altar. Pike describes these shrine-like types of structure as “places of accumulation”, and argues that they are not viewed in the same manner as the festival site’s circle space, where conflict can occur over

what personal items can or cannot be left. At *Astarte* the stone circle has no items at all. I would regularly see people touching the stones, hugging them or ‘listening’ to their ‘energy’. Throughout the weekend, groups of two or three people would walk out of the main camping space and walk amongst the stone circle. This circle then, is a relatively blank communal space, and unlike Pike’s experience, in its lack of personal items, the users at *Astarte* are able to attach their own personal meanings to it.

Camp Space in Talk

The use of space within the camp is an important consideration. Upon arriving at the gate, the campers are given maps of the *Astarte* campsite. This map contains information about utilities such as toilets and a water tap for drinking and washing, in addition to giving the location of the permanent stone circle and spring. In the centre of the main field, a large marquee is erected, where workshops and presentations take place; and at the side of this is an area noted as “marketplace”, similar to that seen at conferences. As the participants of the camp use this map to move around the site, they interact with the objects they encounter and with each other. The stone circle remains as an enduring memory for the Pagans from year to year, but over the weekend the non-permanent features also become topics for conversation and interaction. In their constant revisiting of these spaces and objects, and their subsequent conversations about them, the members of *Astarte* construct a collective memory of their camp experience. Turnbull (2002) has noted that “space has history, and if knowledge is performative, it is spatial”. Over the course of a weekend, in their talking about stalls, objects on offer and the campsite itself, narratives of camp experience are generated. These can then be used as resources at moots and other Pagan gatherings.

At each Pagan camp there will be a campfire that becomes the focus of activity each evening. Pike (2001) puts this at the centre of the festival experience, observing that it is the point at which the most conflict can occur and the most identity ‘play’ happens. At *Astarte* this can also be seen to be the case, as I observed. On the Saturday night, after a day of workshops and rituals, one of the participants began complaining about the children’s curfew that was in place. He was told by the organizer that the campfire at night is not a suitable place for children to be, not only because they were worried about how some might react to the nudity present at the fire, but also because parents, when intoxicated, tended not to take care of their offspring. This infuriated the man, who

claimed that his children were responsible enough to take care of themselves and that he was not even drinking alcohol. At this point an inebriated woman stood up and shouted, “Calm down! We are all Pagans! This is supposed to be a fucking community!” before falling back down. Clearly there were expectations of the event that were not being met. It is interesting to note that her understanding of community in this case was one of total consensus. Yet in actuality, conflict over the rights of children, the noise of late-night drummers, intrusive naked dancers and the availability of illegal narcotics occurred regularly throughout the whole weekend.

It should be noted, however, that the campfire is not the only location where these debates occur. An important point to recognize is that not every participant will go to the fire every night; in fact some rarely leave their tents over the whole weekend. This demonstrates that the ways in which people participate at these events differs tremendously. Like rituals, conferences and moots, individuals attend Pagan camps for many different reasons, and take on different ‘roles’. There are organizers, presenters, ritual coordinators, ritual participants, sweatlodge builders and market-stall holders. Within this milieu are ‘campers’: the people whose main act is simply to enjoy the outward-bound camping experience. Arguably, this is yet another distinction between the analyses of American festivals and British Pagan camps. Much of the British event differs little from the camping trips organized by families and friends. Indeed the very word, ‘camps’ rather than ‘festivals’ points towards this difference. The ‘magical’ experience of a camp for many British Pagans is based less on ritual and more on the love of ‘getting outdoors’ and living in a tent for a weekend. A great deal of the talk – indeed, much of the behavior – in evidence at the camp is of an entirely different nature to Pike’s description of a ritually sourced festival ‘bond’. The majority of behavior is not obviously ‘spiritual’, and while a few individuals will conduct magical rituals, these are definitely a minority. The campers instead spend much of the day sitting around talking, shopping at the selection of stalls and praising or criticizing the organization of the event. This is not to say that there is no bond in evidence however. Camp members appear quite able to utilise this ostensibly ‘mundane’ level of communication to forge relationships, which are often strong enough to sustain themselves over the entire weekend and further into future camps.

Conclusion: Knowledge and Symbol in Play and Performance

This chapter has examined three Pagan contexts that initially appear unrelated, but as we have seen they are actually integrated in that elements of each setting appear in the others. In ritual settings an opportunity is presented for Pagan identities and affiliations to be expressed, yet controlled within structure. They have an element of ‘playfulness’ to them and can begin as relatively improvised interaction, but this interaction works to create a structured environment within which there is leeway for individual creativity and expression. We have seen how Goffman’s (1967) understanding of social ‘rituals’ is helpful in understanding these encounters. The ordering of Pagan ritual is internally generated, by the processes of role-taking, respect of individual knowledge and negotiated play. This playful element suggests that the assessment presented in Chapter Three, that contemporary Paganism is a late-modern religion, has some validity. At conferences, knowledge and information can be gained that can subsequently be used in ritual. They are also a performance space for the Pagan celebrities, who present their views within a context of academic inquiry, but in a non-academic, non-egalitarian manner. These are also events where items are traded that fit within a general category of ‘folk’ or hand-mades. Finally, British Pagan camps are environments that contain rituals, presentations and workshops and therefore can be seen to combine these other contexts to some extent. The Pagan camp is the setting where the processes at work within ritual and those at conferences combine over a weekend to give, as Jennie said, “a sense of community” where one “isn’t alone”. This is despite the conflict that can occur in that context.

The majority of research into Pagan behaviour revolves around the ability to transform ‘identity’ within magical or festival contexts. As stated, Greenwood suggests that magical ritual creates strong emotional ties; Pike (2001) also argues that ritual gives rise – in part at least – to the formation of strong group identities, even if the ritual participants do not know each other well. As we have seen in this chapter, the move from unstructured to structured group behaviour is one that can be explained in ‘non-magical’ terms. In temporary groups, such as those in unplanned semi-public rituals or at Pagan camps, group ties as understood within a frame of structure rather than solely emotion are constructed and maintained via the action in the event. This can be accounted for by noting the preferred responses within public open rituals, the taking on of different roles, and the emphasis on resolving conflict by reference to personal knowledge. In the next chapter, these structuring forces seemingly work within a context without physicality.

Chapter Six: 'Techy-Pagans': Identity, Communication and Community in a Pagan Listserv²⁰

Judith tells me about her 'love' - her 'teacher'... who teaches her by email about Crowley and Spare, but who she's never met (Extract from Fieldnotes, 2000)

Introduction

In the past decade much has been written regarding the importance of the internet in all areas of contemporary life (Castells, 2000; Wellman, 2002, Slevin, 2000). If we are to examine the claims from a predominantly quantitative position, it is undeniable that the internet 'revolution' is well and truly upon us. It is, for example, difficult to argue with recent figures stating that the number of people in the United Kingdom alone who have regular access to the internet is around thirty four million, over fifty percent of the population²¹. For many, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) remain at the forefront of contemporary life, increasingly permeating our everyday social behaviour, from the way we receive news to how we shop²². Some extraordinary claims have been made about the effect of this electronic communications boom on the communication between and identity of its users. It has been argued that this technology affords the production of new self-identities, sexualities and disembodiment (McRae, 1996; Turkle, 1995; Stone, 1995), thereby freeing individuals from their physical identities. Others argue that the internet places individual identity at risk, breaking apart traditional communities and a singular self (Gergen, 1991). In contrast, many have praised the medium, suggesting that via the different internet forms, communities can be generated, much like in 'real life', maintaining strong emotional ties between users (Rheingold, 2000, Wellman, 2003), albeit in differing ways (Delanty, 2003).

The short fieldnotes extract above from Judith, displays the significance that internet communication can have for some people. While it may be an extreme example, it was a

²⁰ 'Techy-Pagan' was the way one interviewee defined himself at a moot. The term 'techno-pagan' has been utilised by others (http://technopagan.dhs.org/wired_technopagans.html) to refer to a similar but more extreme 'virtual' identity. 'Cyber-pagan' is another similarly used term.

²¹ http://www.nua.com/surveys/how_many_online/europe.html. The debate about who has 'access' to the internet has been a key component in research into internet technology (see for example the ESRC funded 'Virtual Society' Project at <http://virtualsociety.sbs.ox.ac.uk/> [accessed September 2003])

²² http://observer.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,6903,582206,00.html

significant factor in shaping the structure of a Pagan community within a city. Judith was an organiser of a Pagan moot and had been in a relationship with another Pagan in the same city for several years, cohabiting with him. He had invested money into her property and business and they were considering marriage. While he was at work however, Judith was online talking to another Pagan via instant messaging software. This new found friend, whom she never met outside of this virtual context in all the time I was doing fieldwork, became more and more important to her. She became so attached to him that she separated from her fiancé, consequently losing both her property and her business. It suggests two initial considerations for this study. Firstly, that Pagans following a 'nature religion' (Pearson, 1998) are not in any way averse to the use of technology, in fact for many, it is a central part of their Pagan practice. Secondly, and related to this, it highlights the importance of including the virtual realm in a study of the offline interaction, as the two can clearly affect each other. If, as has been argued by those with a predominantly 'postmodern' slant, the use of ICTs radically affects understandings of self, identity and belonging, it should be possible to see these effects within the interaction of its users. This chapter examines these issues.

Methodology

“Fluffy Bunnies and people trying to convince us they come from a long line of witches etc will get short shrift” (*British Pagan's Homepage*)

This chapter is an ethnographic study of the interaction between various members of a Pagan email group, *British Pagans Online* (hereafter called *British Pagans* for brevity). This approach was taken because, as has been highlighted in previous chapters, an understanding of the features of community can only be found by examining the existent micro-social processes that, although utilised by members of a group, may not be immediately apparent to them. In order to begin to gain an understanding of these contingent practices, it is necessary to view a context from within, to a certain extent 'being there' (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997) and exploring the interaction as it occurs. Yet, as will be seen, 'being there' in a virtual environment raises issues specific to the medium. The relationship between this and gaining access is explored in the section below, as this is something that every member, not solely the researcher, must engage with. There are, however, some methodological considerations that had to be approached during the ethnographic research, which are explored here.

Cyberspace has been hailed as a liberating space where one is able to present oneself in multiple ways, even to the point of switching gender and sexuality. This may not be ethically accepted by other users (Reid, 1995), or by critically-minded academics (Morton, 1999), but it raises the question of which ‘identity’ to present as a researcher of the internet. Of course, this is not unique to the virtual context, but online identity is not limited by physical appearance (Reid, 1995), although these may still be significant. The point is summarised accurately by Markham (1998):

To be present in cyberspace is to learn how to be embodied there. To be embodied there is to participate. To participate is to know enough about the rules for interaction and movement so that movement and interaction with and within this space is possible (Markham, 1998: 23).

We can assert therefore, that to know of these rules of interaction, one must take part in the setting. This suggests that the most suitable method is participant observation, a point echoed by Kendall (1999) who presents some forms of analysis of online (and offline) research incorporating this approach. Kendall attempts to map out a more complete picture of cyberspace than in previous studies, examining political and cultural contexts of offline users in addition to in-depth observation. A significant finding is that some researchers “overgeneralize regarding particular types of forums, relying on superficial characterizations” (Kendall, 1999: 68). It is clear that an accurate understanding of an online (or for that matter, any) context from the ‘insider’s’ perspective will require a close, lengthy period of participant observation.

The decision to undertake research on the *British Pagans* email list emerged from my initial familiarity with members of the group, having followed up an interest after hearing about its formation in October, 1999, just prior to beginning my PhD. At its birth, the list-owner emphasised the need for a spirit of community on the list, therefore it appeared to be eminently suitable for the objective of my research. Because the topic was online interaction and not the ‘internet’ *per se*, several other potential online research arenas were ignored. These including chatrooms, bulletin boards, newsgroups and webpages, each of which would have brought issues of their own but which may not have been relevant for the present analysis. Multiple studies of personal homepages have been written (Walker, 2000; Wynn and Katz, 1997) and research into chat-room and multi-user domain (MUD)

behaviour has been conducted (Turkle, 1995; Porter, 1996), but these have tended to focus more on the theoretical identity freeing aspect of the 'role-playing' nature of the medium, rather than longitudinal group analysis.

This ethnographic approach raises some unique issues due to the communication taking place in an internet forum, and not in a physical space. Ward (1999) in her study of Feminist 'online' communities has examined some of these methodological considerations. She argues that there is a hybridisation of physical and virtual space on the internet, so that interaction occurs between the actions taken in the physical world and those taken in chat rooms, bulletin boards, and email lists. However, in contrast with Gajjala (2000), she suggests that it is unhelpful to form a dichotomy between ethnography and 'cyber-ethnography', arguing that in actuality the latter is a tool to be used by the former. Hine (2000) writes in a similar vein in her account of online research, rejecting claims that the internet is radically different to the 'physical' context. The fundamental difference of course is that an email list, newsgroup or chat room are (primarily) text-based.

The principal position taken during fieldwork was in agreement with the prescription for cyber-ethnography given by Ward (1999). She suggests:

It avoids holding any pre-conceived ideas concerning the existence of the online community. Rather than studying a group and assuming it to be a community, cyber-ethnography allows the participants to take the lead role in establishing the reality. (Ward, 1999:1.7)

This is a difficult methodological objective, but one which, if followed, allows a greater understanding of the wider context and participation of a network of individuals. In the case of *British Pagans*, as will be seen, this approach allows the question of exactly what the community consists of, beyond the technologically-generated boundaries of membership figures. However, as with any other research object, there must be some initial bounded context, whether this is a moot, ritual, or in this case an online group. It is this consideration that gives the present chapter an emphasis upon only one group, instead of a much wider field, incorporating the entire collection of internet objects.

Marham's (1998) emphasis on participation is particularly significant in the case of *British Pagans*. In many internet contexts it is possible to research relatively passively and

subsequently issues of ‘secrecy’ do not arise. However, the group stressed a ‘no lurking’ rule, obliging new members to give a self-introduction and post messages to the list frequently. Additionally, many email lists are in the public domain, but *British Pagans* is a semi-private list, requiring approval from the list-moderators before any new members can be accepted. One consequence is that it provides a selection of bounded, recurring individuals, but it also raises ethical questions about the extent of covertness in research. These are not unique to this medium and have been discussed in previous chapters, but here there is an additional consideration related to the commonly stated assumption that the internet allows anonymity (Grodin and Lindlof, 1996). The assumption was flawed in this case, due to the interrelationship between the online and offline communities, as during my fieldwork, email was the most frequent method of contacting potential interviewees, and of members of the Northtown moot contacting me. Additionally, my membership of the *British Pagans* group became the way in which Phillip introduced me to several individuals at his moot and at the Pagan camp, who were also members of the list.

One final note can be added here. An enormous advantage of this context is that the data (messages, files etc) can readily be collected and saved. It also allows a snapshot of the activity of the group. Yet, this is no substitute for continued grounded analysis at the time of the messages being posted. Online archived data can be lost, accidentally corrupted, or as in the case of one *British Pagans* member, intentionally deleted weeks after being sent. This following analysis section of this chapter subsequently was based on a vast amount of data (over 16896 messages were sent during the period of research). In order to keep the observations as clear as possible, it takes on the form of an ethnographic narrative. The narrative emerges out of the progression of the group from its inception to its situation at the time of writing, but focuses most strongly upon this earlier active period, as this contains the clearest examples of the themes discussed.

Formation of the British Pagans Group

British Pagans began in October 1999 when its founder, Joanne, began emailing other online lists and newsgroups with the link to her newly-built group, hosted on *onelist.com*. When I joined, there were only five other members, but within one day this had risen to ten, and steadily rose over the rest of the month. This first week contained introductory messages by all the new members, as requested in the email that was automatically sent

upon joining. Already at this period of inception, a clear ‘leader’ was in evidence, in the role of an administrator. The reason for this was arguably one of convention or legality and not due to the technology itself, but it was the structure of the *onelist* software that created the requirement. Each group or listserv on the internet will have an owner, a manager, or moderator and this (usually one) person will have the responsibility of holding the information about membership and if necessary reporting abuses of the hosting company’s guidelines. It was therefore Joanne’s responsibility to promote the group and find Pagans who wished to join, and then maintain the membership and messages. The administration of the group was significant in the early interactions, not least because of the relish with which Joanne took on the role, sending repetitive ‘welcome’ messages in response to introductions, and numerous administrative notices relating to the general format of the *onelist* homepage.

In this context the significance of the officially recognised leader cannot be underestimated, as this person has the ability to enforce the content, and even the formatting of messages sent by other members:

Merry Meet,
Please give a subject for your messages. This makes it a whole lot easier for people who have just joined to understand.
Also if you wish to advertise your own services please e-mail the moderator first.
Please do not post things to the files without permission first for obvious reasons.
The files will be updated later in the week and there will be lots of information for you to look at.
If anyone has anything to contribute to the files that would be great .Please send me your info
Blessings Joanne
(Joanne 61²³)

In these messages, Joanne was already beginning to shape the group. She added some introductory information about witchcraft to the *onelist* files page, prompting thanks from the new members for her efforts. This was then followed up by “daily questions”, emailed to the list by Joanne, which dealt with topics such as “What is your opinion of the Wiccan Rede” and “Do you believe in Fairys?” This was then followed by an inquiry to ask if

²³ The number of a quote refers to its place in an electronic archive.

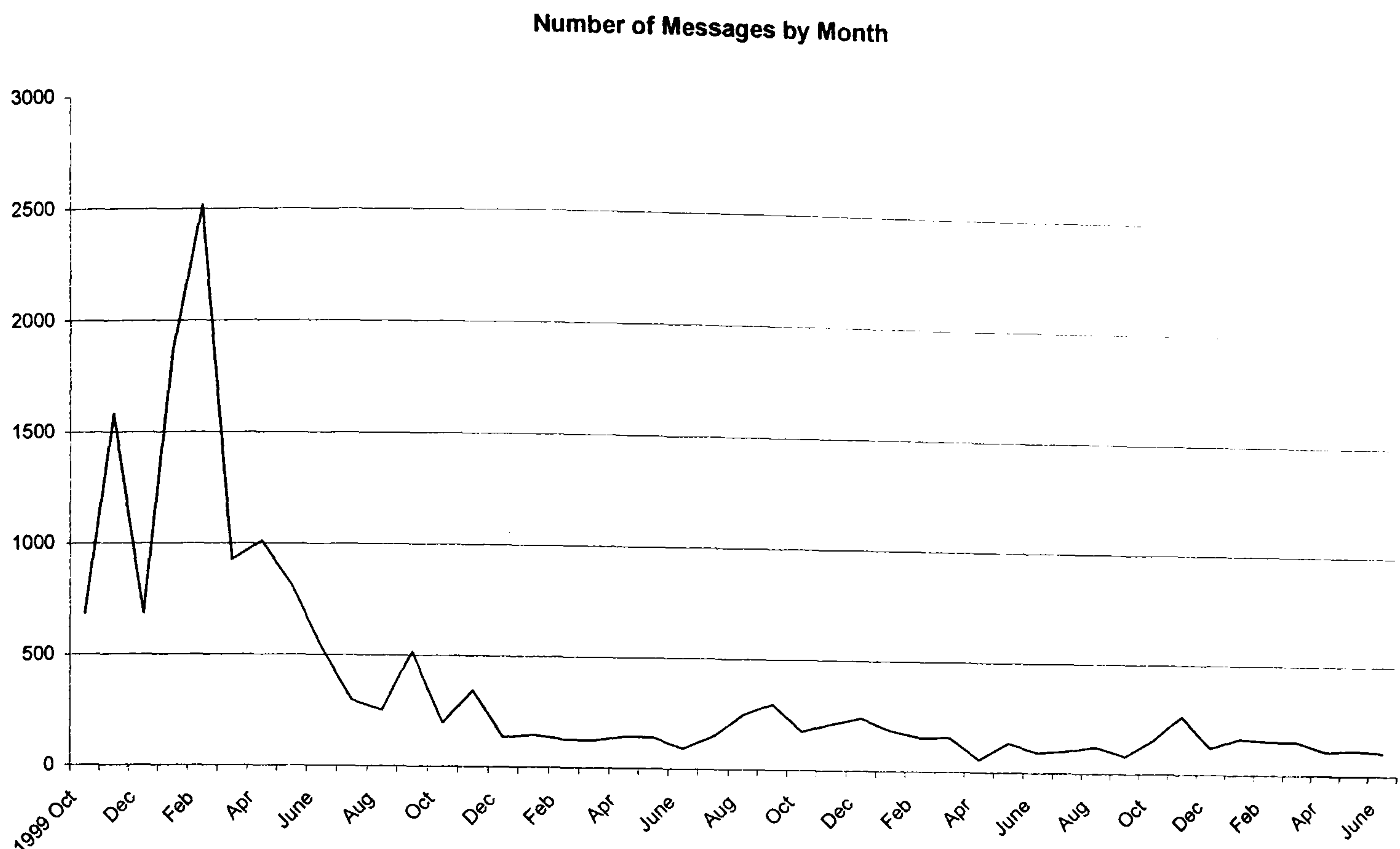
anybody on the list would be interested in receiving ‘lessons’, teaching the basics of Witchcraft. One member replied to inform Joanne that her Pagan group has 13 lessons that they send in the form of email, and asked if these would be suitable. This received a response from another member, Jayne, who asked if she could see them, as she was thinking of using a similar teaching method. Very quickly, Joanne replied to Jayne’s message, as though it were directed to her, and began sending her own ‘lessons’ to the list. We cannot say whether this was a misunderstanding or not, but it enabled Joanne to continue with her planned lessons, which were gleaned from various published sources, but which only occasionally referred to them. It was clear that she was positioning herself in a role of a Pagan teacher.

Active Times

The email lessons shaped the group interaction in ways other than perhaps raising the profile of Joanne. New members to the group would not know the “rules of interaction and movement” (Markham, 1998: 23) in order to participate. Fortunately, Joanne’s lessons would show the way, serving as an exemplary model. The very same day that she began sending them to the list, others began to follow with their own topics for discussion, using exactly the same format. Prior to the lessons, messages had consisted of introductions, occasional poems for the homepage and messages of appreciation by other members. After Joanne had begun sending lessons, suddenly, and unrelated to the number of members which by this point had stabilised, there were a vast number of emails. There were ‘daily words’, ‘daily polls’, and suggestions of related articles to read. This was the first peak of group activity and would be the model for the following months.

The graph below shows the number of messages sent to *British Pagans* from its beginning to July 2003.

Figure 1. Number of Messages by Month



The volume of messages peaked in November of 1999; the same time that *onelist* announced its merger with *egroups*. Vast numbers of emails were being sent every day and some of the members that were not sending messages began to complain and unsubscribe from the list. It was not long before the messages increased again in the New Year peaking in February 2000, when 2518 messages were sent. This was the heyday of the group, when multiple conversations would be occurring at the same time, in the form of numerous messages that differed in style. Later in that year, the number of messages steadily decreased, peaking occasionally, but never again reaching the previous level of activity.

Genre/style

Gruber (2000) in his quantitative and qualitative study of academic discussion lists examines the differing styles of messages and attempts to conceptualise them as a Genre in the vein of Swales' (1990) genre analysis of discourse communities. Although rather unsuccessful in his attempt – he concludes that his academic list discussion consists of a genre and many 'sub-genres' – it is nevertheless a good starting point in examining online communication, as there are clearly different textual styles used in different lists. More significantly, in *British Pagans*, in agreement with Gruber, several styles occur within the

same list, and this is also patterned. It forms distinct types of exchanges that in concert can be seen to structure the interactions of the community. This was particularly the case during the most active period in early 2000, analysed below.

Administrating and Moderating

The first type of message relates to the supervision of the group, and can be seen to operate on a formal and an informal level. *British Pagans* has been through several administrative changes, initially created on *www.onelist.com*, but moving to *egroups.com* after the two companies merged. It is presently hosted on *yahoo.com*, after yet another buyout. At the time of my joining there were several other groups on this same server devoted to various related topics including forums on the general topic of religion, and those focussing upon 'Earth Mysteries'. Joanne had advertised her newly developed *British Pagans* list on these other email lists, and this is how I and the other initial members came to learn about it. She claimed to have sent out over 300 emails to the various lists to advertise her group. After going through the process of registering with *www.onelist.com*, it was extremely easy to join interest lists, by simply following a hypertext link to the correct page and selecting the hyperlink, 'join group'.

Each group, without exception, would have an administrator, who would have the power to decide upon membership and, if they wished, to completely end the group's existence. The expressed purpose of the list, according to Joanne as owner, was given in its description on the egroups website. It stated that

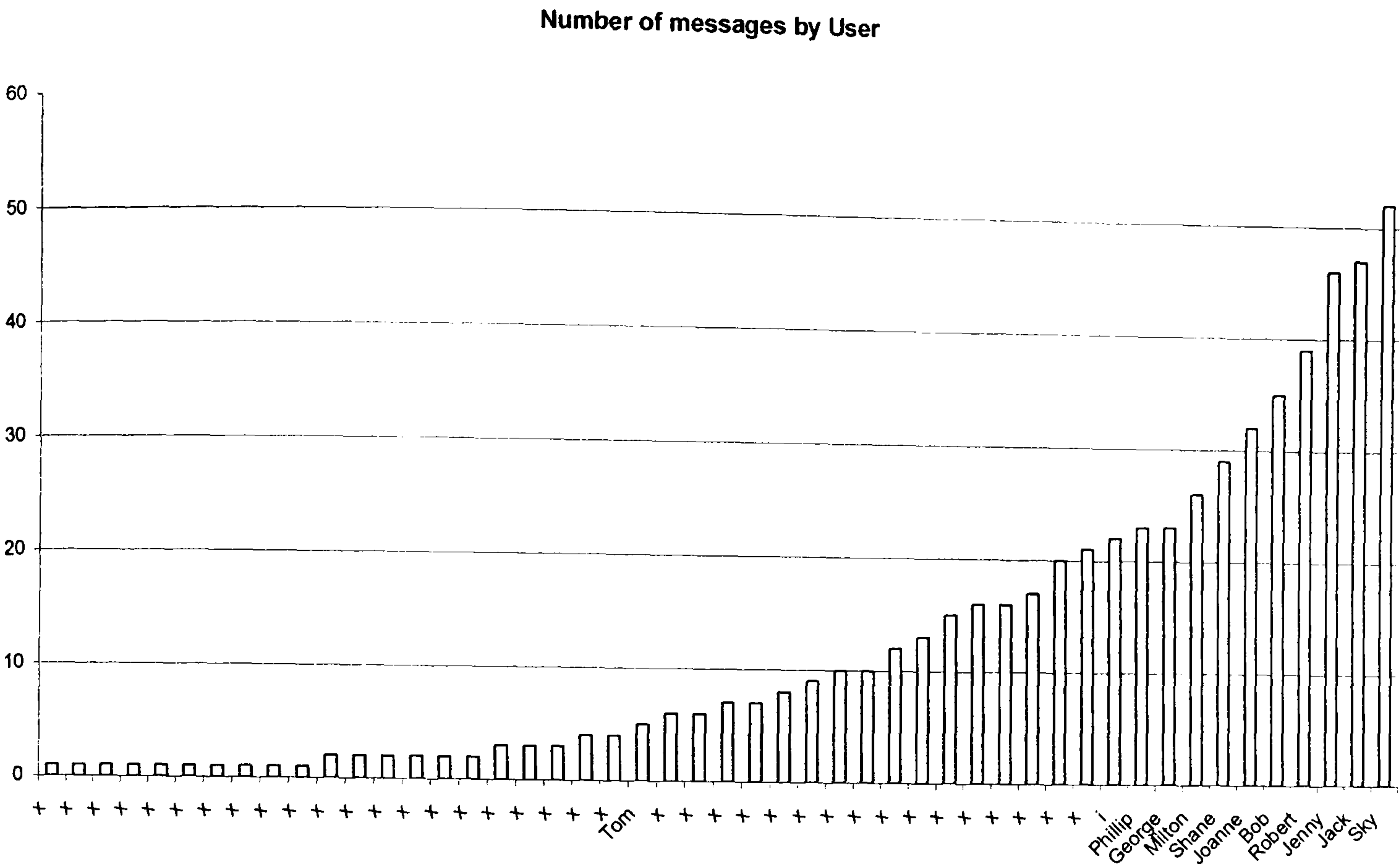
This list aims to help people with advice, let them make friends and learn from each other, at times our debates may become heated. We also encourage a healthy sense of humour and take pride in who and what we are. People who are new to Witchcraft are welcome to join and learn from the more experienced members.

Essentially therefore, someone who came across the list was informed that it is a networking and educational group, a place where advice about Paganism could be sought and fun can be found. The comment that invites newcomers to learn from "experienced members" implies that there is a knowledge base that has been built upon by certain individuals in the group and that it is attainable by others. The description predefines to

some extent the content that will be posted to the group, but also the format of interaction. It says for example that advice will be sought and that, “debates may become heated”. The new member is aware therefore of the discursive nature of the list, and may be expected, at least in part, to act within these norms. As already mentioned, the other members appeared to follow Joanne’s example, by sending daily messages in a similar style, but there were some emails that were only sent by the administrator of the list.

One way in which Joanne used her position as leader was to post messages ‘moderating’ behaviour. In the first few months of the list’s existence, she attempted to evoke activity in the other members by imposing a ‘no lurking’ rule. This was a rule where individual members were obliged to post messages and not simply ‘lurk’ – a term for those who read but do not send messages (Baym, 1993). It is not surprising that Joanne wished to see a lot of activity on her newly created list, but this had an effect on the types of interactions that occurred. Initially, members of *British Pagans*, if they were to be viewed as more than just ‘lurkers’ (and potentially rejected), needed to send something to the list in order to get noticed. All members were confronted with the automatic addition in list messages of a line stating, “NO LURKING”, restated on the homepage in the form of, “We do not tolerate lurkers ! All lurkers will be unsubscribed” (6790). This distain for lurkers might be expected to raise the distribution of individuals posting. It certainly did generate emails from many members, as subsequently over 75 percent of the membership sent at least one message in the first five months. Yet, the distribution was not evenly spread, as can be seen in the following diagram:

Figure 2. Number of Messages by User



This graph shows the number of emails sent by those members who chose to participate during the week of the 31st January to the 6th February 2000. It is immediately apparent that out of the 611 emails some members posted far more messages than others, with Joanne being one of the more frequent participants. However, it is the *types* of messages and the responses to these, rather than solely volume, that are significant here. Perhaps due to the no lurking rule, the ‘self-introduction’ message counted for the figures of only one email sent, to the left of the graph. The other messages accounted for the whole spectrum of types discussed below. Yet, like the rest of this month, this was a period of high debate in the group, and it is these often short debating responses to short information postings that make up the majority of the messages sent.

During this period, often only minutes would pass between messages, and finally the volume of messages that members were receiving in their email inboxes became the reason given by many for their departure from the list. As owner, Joanne attempted to stop this with an email that began with a set of personal issues with the content of recent messages, but ended as administrative rule-setting.

Just logged on to a right load of Rubbish to be honest , nothing at all interesting and worth reading [...] Why dont those who want to e-mail these messages do it to each other personally or even

start up * Such and such * a persons fanclub list ! I would rather have this than have it on my list . [...]I will say one thing THIS LIST IS FOR WITCHES TO DISCUSS AND SHARE IDEAS . It is in plain print when you subscribe [...] Lets get the list back into line now before it becomes another chat list for Witches . (Joanne 6658)

This message clearly states the type of community that Joanne envisaged and it was indeed understood as a moderating email by the other active members, as seen in their acknowledgment of Joanne's administrator role in replies of defence. :

As I have said - this is Joannes list - and yes - if she wishes that there be no more SMILES and LAUGHTER on this list - Joannes rules I will obey !! (Jenny 6720)

As for Joanne dictating to you all, fine! As list owner she can DICTATE the rules of the list, and you either accept them or unsub. [...]In the meantime, might I respectfully suggest that we abide by the list owner's wishes? (Bob 6687)

It is possible to see in these messages several features that characterise them as negotiating administration. Essentially, administrative emails contain direct statements pertaining to the purpose of the list, and although they may begin with a criticism of one person's behaviour, they will be directed towards the entire group. However, it is the responses that these messages get by other prominent members that suggest they are administrative. These responses will often raise the profile of the administrator, despite containing implicit criticism of their managerial ability. Jenny's message above, for example, is clearly a strong criticism of Joanne's perceived lack of 'fun', yet it also reinforces her position as owner. In Bob's response to this and other criticism, he firmly places Joanne's owner status above others', despite the fact that she did not mention this in her original email.

The position of the official administrator is important structurally, as after all, they have the power to eject members from the group. Joanne put this ability into action soon after these exchanges, banning several members who criticised her original message. The risk that an administrator takes is offending members, and after Joanne gave administrative abilities to selective other members, they sent few moderating emails. However, one of the most striking aspects of the early interactions within the group was the battle for

ownership, in both this literal and symbolic sense. An examination of the messages written at this time tells a tale of the rise and fall of the founder, and a shrewd takeover by a more experienced leader.

When Joanne started the list, she repeatedly informed the new and already existing members of its purpose, which was to be a list for Pagans in the United Kingdom, in opposition to the many US-based lists available online. From the very beginning, Joanne emphasised that she wished it to be a ‘community’. She extended this notion to her first self-created website:

Greetings Everybody,
I am currently designing a website for this list .
If you want to contribute anything towards it that would be great .
Any poems, stories or info etc
Let me add that this will not just be my website but a website for
the
members on this list .
Blessings Joanne

In sending this email Joanne informs the members that she is committed to this list, producing a website in addition to acting as moderator. Her altruistic comment that the website is “for the members on this list” and the frequency with which she asked for suggestions for the site in subsequent emails added to this sense of commitment. Yet because these messages did not receive any replies, it is difficult to judge how they were received by the other group members. This brings us to another feature of administrative messages. They rarely receive more than one reply. The only notable exceptions to this were the occasion relayed above when members took exception to Joanne’s criticism of their brief personal exchanges, and when she began banning several members. This emerged from her attempt to construct the group under one common cause, proposing the drafting of a constitution to which each member would have to sign up. It is possible to understand her act by placing it in the context of a developing rift between three of the most frequent posters, Jenny, Phillip and Bob.

Joanne had admitted to several computing mistakes that she had committed in the first few months – for example, accidentally deleting files from the group’s homepage – and this soon came to extend to a misunderstanding of one comment by Bob. He had been

commenting on a discussion about the ‘Wiccan Rede’, a code of ethics published by the originator of modern Wicca. He wrote:

Ten words the Witches rede fulfil, "an it harm none, then you're doing it all wrong!"

Bob, "What's wrong with Shi-ite Wicca?" (Bob 343)

His final comment caused offence to Joanne. She asked him what was meant by it, to which she received no reply for several hours, subsequently responding with a strongly worded warning:

"What's wrong with Shi-ite Wicca?"

This was posted on the list today.

Any Witch wars will not be tolerated . People who insult any members beliefs will be banned from the list . Is it not enough that we face discrimination from others ?

Personal insults to other members are also not tolerated. However lively debates with meaning behind them are.

Blessed Be Joanne (Joanne 355)

This response again is addressed directly to all the members on the list. In one respect Joanne is again presenting an altruistic ideal, rushing to the aid of the other members, but she is also demonstrating her understanding of a wider cultural Pagan notion of discrimination, a point that shall be addressed later in this chapter. Finally however, this email is an explicit statement of her control of the group, as she states that insults will “not be tolerated”

We might assume, based on the literature reviewed in chapter 2, that had it been Bob’s actual aim to offend, Joanne may have raised her status as leader significantly, demonstrating the qualities of an effective ‘task specialist’ (Brown, 2000). Unfortunately however, Bob replied one hour later, informing the list of the origin of his “shi-ite Wicca” phrase – as a title given to him by a friend some time ago due to his stubbornness at the time. Joanne had thereby shown herself to be a little hasty in her reaction. Her problems were compounded when she took offence at a comment by Phillip that disagreed with her description of a ‘witches’ ladder’, that additionally insinuated that she might not be a

‘real’ witch. She swiftly banned Phillip from accessing the list. After a private email exchange between the two of them, she allowed him to come back, with the comment to the list, “let’s keep this friendly”, again attempting to assert her managerial authority. A constitution of sorts was then drafted, incorporating suggestions from other members. This was placed on the website that Joanne designed and held suggestions about list etiquette and the statement that the list was inclusive of all Pagan ‘paths’, provided members respected those of the others.

It would be wrong to suggest that administrative postings were only sent by official administrators. Other members could affect the norms of the group, on occasion reminding other members of correct ‘netiquette’ – such as reducing the amount of repetitive quoting in replies (862). This was unusual however, and usually these types of messages were sent from individuals with ascribed moderator status. Similarly, other actions afforded by the software on *onelist* and *egroups.com*, such as online polls, were only used by the moderators and reflected a broadly ‘organisational’ theme, that is, they are concerned with the running of the group. In the first few months of the list’s existence, these polls were designed by Joanne in her attempt to involve the members in the development of the group. Members could vote on such topics as the best time of year for meeting each other in particular cities, and whether they wished to receive the ‘lessons’ that she was offering. Since the creation of the list, only one of these organised meetings has taken place.

Treatise and debate

The second type of exchanges to occur in *British Pagans* can best be categorised as treatises. These messages are lengthy arguments written by members who tend to be well read and topics will refer to arguments given in texts. For example, one regular poster of these is an ex-university lecturer. Nevertheless, a feature of these messages that distinguishes them from ‘academic’ essays is that rarely are the texts directly quoted, instead being paraphrased, and the texts used may be from websites in addition to books. Moreover, although it is possible, using most email software, to directly quote in a reply to an email, there are different techniques of referring back to the arguments contained within. Gruber (2000) argued that, in the case of his academic email analysis, the list that indirectly quoted, rather than directly copying previous messages, did so to appeal to ‘insiders’ who would be able to follow the debate closely. The argument is also

persuasive here, as the limited membership of *British Pagans*, in conjunction with the ability to see archived messages directly from the website means that members can easily follow arguments if they wish. Despite this, unlike Gruber, it is not possible to use this as a basis for characterising the entire list as a single genre. There are both different ways of quoting and multiple approaches taken to the debates. For example, in the following extract from a treatise sent during the most active days of the group, Shane raises questions about the validity of marriage:

Why get married? If you're Christian, then I can see why.
In days gone by, there was a social reason, pressure exerted
by the community on 'un-married couples', the disgrace, etc.
[...]To me, Handfasting makes sense. I'm unsure why pagans would
choose to either a) go through an Xtian marriage ceremony,
or b) go for the basic legal deal.
[...]I'd love to hear other people views ...
(3051)

The first response to this did not quote at all, but merely stated:

We're married, but that was before we found our path, there were
still *some* tax advantages and Xtian parents.
[...]
Incidentally, if you're male, have kids, and want to have a say
in your kids upbringing (should you ever separate) you have to be
married.
(3058)

After two other messages however, direct quoting was used:

Robert wrote:
[...]
> Speaking as a former foster parent and friend of chap who
> fathered 2 children, I can assure you that if you are not
married
> to the mother, your interest in the children will rarely extend
> beyond the cheque book (that you ARE considered useful for)

Yes - I was just thinking that - amazing how it works one
way and not the other ... ! It's crazy ... so you could

'pay' financially, and yet have no say in the upbringing?

Madness ...

(3064)

This particular debate remained between three people. Other debates have begun with more members sending related comments without any quoting, but ending in a similar pattern, with two or three people replying to directly quoted sections. A discussion about the pros and cons of vegetarianism peaked at 8 participants but ended with an exchange of four messages between two members, both directly quoting. We can propose therefore that the quoting was not solely in order to aid the participants in following the debate, and it seems unlikely that the participants were expecting others to join in after the discussion had narrowed. Rather, direct quoting was used when debate moved from a general inclusive one, to an exclusive conversation. In effect the once open discussion becomes a conversation between the two or three people quoted. Nevertheless, occasionally, a new participant in a conversation would join the debate late, and in this case would use direct quotation as an extract with which to argue directly with the person quoted. These messages rarely received a reply however; and so we can suggest that these members were not included in the discussion as such.

We can see that this shaping of discussion, including the 'late arrival' of participants, is partly due to this form of online communication being asynchronous, unlike real-time discourse. As noted by Baym (1995) in a continually asynchronous medium, individuals will have the ability to carefully modify and edit their messages prior to sending. In an opposite case, in a chat room for example, the users would have very limited time to compose replies if they wished to remain in the conversation. Additionally, any method of communication that takes place over the internet requires some means of connection to the network in order to read and send emails. Contrary to the majority of other communicative methods, the equipment necessary for this is expensive and usually large enough to deter portability in the way that pen and paper, or mobile telephones allow. Consequently, the location of the individual when they communicate to a group is fixed, usually to their home or workplace, and this will affect the times when one can access their computer. In the case of *British Pagans* for example, Phillip accessed the internet from where he worked, along with several others who were in the same situation. The result of this was that messages to the group and their responses were constrained by the times at which people could gain access to the internet. In the group a debate may begin

and develop over a matter of minutes, and its length and depth will depend upon who is online at that time and the number of people who access their email frequently.

One of the consequences of this is that ‘threads’ – topics of conversation arranged by their subject header line in the email – are often conversations between a limited number of people who are online at a particular time. This has an effect on the types of debates and discussions that occur, in that the presence or absence of certain members and their input shapes the discourse. It also means that at times, should other members be offline, exchanges can take place between members who do not post so often. In actuality therefore, the graph given earlier is an incomplete representation of what occurs in the group, as members messages are not evenly spread throughout the day or even the week. This is especially true of the less critically oriented discourses, discussed more fully below. An example of this is the series of exchanges that began with an assertion by a member, Shane, in answer to a comment by another member, Amanda, stating that “people get what they perceive the afterlife to be”. After three brief exchanges in which Amanda asked if she could pass the joke on, there followed a rapid succession of comments and ‘additions’ to the original joke, until eventually another joke was posted, which in turn encouraged further comments. These exchanges took place over an afternoon, and by the evening, the thread ceased. In contrast, a debate based around a collection of Egyptian gods lasted for longer, gradually ‘evolving’ as the subject headers were changed from “Sekhmet-Maat” to “Osiris-Sekhmet”, eventually becoming “Egregores” when the topic of conversation, having built upon the debate about gods, became a discussion about the nature of human-made gods. This demonstrates that the more philosophical discussions in the group had an increased number of responses, but that they would be posted over a longer period of time than the more humorous messages. This could have been for several reasons, perhaps the most obvious being that it takes more time to compose.

Outrage

More than occasionally, treatises will be written on a topic that raises discussion to a fervour. This occurs when someone sends a message relating directly to the wider Pagan community. Often the argument will centre on a news article or message forwarded from another list that highlights one of two topics: discrimination against Pagans, or the growth of “fluffy” Paganism, particularly emerging from America. The latter term relates to a phrase often used by British Pagans, “fluffy bunny”, denoting a Pagan who does not

accept the realistic ‘dark’ or bad things that happen in life and in nature. It was referred to on the *British Pagans* homepage:

We make no apologies for who and what we are, and we refuse to hide in the broom cupboard to please the bigots of society. Fluffy Bunnies and people trying to convince us they come from a long line of witches etc will get short shrift as will people who attempt to convert others to their path.

“Fluffy Bunny” is here (and in most other Pagan settings) used as a ‘put down’, and on more than one occasion at the inception of the list was used as a way of undermining an argument by suggesting, for example, that they were “generally bods who do not know enough to do things properly or safely” [sic]. When a discussion arose that revolved around defining “fluffy bunny”, every suggestion was in agreement with this²⁴:

these are the ones who insit everything is light & happy & usually see the world through rose colored glasses (16636)

They are the type of people who have never had anything really difficult to cope with in life, so they tend to be under 30 (but not always) ; they've generally had a comfortable middle-class upbringing. And it's not gender-specific - I've met a lot of male FBs (16638)

Despite its negative connotations, one member managed to take on the term as her own, and used it to strengthen her individual identity within the group. It began with a discussion about the ethics of ‘Wiccaning’ – an equivalent practice to the Christening of children – in which the concept of ‘light’ and ‘dark’ witchcraft was discussed. In this exchange, a member called “Hummingbird” wrote:

Fluffy bunnies..... cute cuddly term used to irritate people
Many use it "bunny" as a pet name for partner (if partner male
add cute and he will want to throw up)
But they are supposed to be all lovey dovey and nice and I am sick
of them.
< shoot the fluffy bunnies.....wheres me wand I will ZAP them
with it>>>>.

²⁴ websites that parodied the concept were also posted to the group (http://tftb.com/deify_fluffybunny.htm; <http://www.fluffbunnytrad.com/>)

Love

Hummingbird (5551)

This message was in complete agreement with the previous definitions, with an additional witchcraft-themed ending, but it was actually not in keeping with Hummingbird's usual position:

Well I would love just once to see something stump Time Team
once.....but
they would cut it from filming...heheheh
But can see why we shouldnt, it would ruin the data evidence and
put whole
dig out of tune as well, I might be a fluffy bunny but only
stupid one with
partners...lol
Love and Light
A crystal loving hummingbird (12925)

Hummingbird used this identity in many of her messages, allowing it to become a feature that would identify her as distinct from the 'fluffy' Pagans so despised by the group. She would consistently conclude her emails by signing off with a related prefix, such as:

That's not a fluffy that's a furry (14212)
Love and ticked of fluffy bunnies (5855)
Will try not to be a fluffy bunny but I like it..... (6807)

Additionally, other members would occasionally make reference to her lack of 'fluffy' character, but this 'putdown' humour at no time evoked hostile responses from Hummingbird. Terrion and Ashforth (2002) have suggested that this form of humour is important for generating a sense of togetherness in temporary groups – or *communitas* (Turner, 1967), as they prefer. Certainly, it did not appear to create separatism between the members, and fits well with their analysis.

The type of dual identity expressed by Hummingbird was common in the list and came to be significant at times of outrage. On the occasion when an announcement was posted to the group informing members of the intentions of a notable US-based author to publish

‘Teen-Witch kits’, every response opposed the publication. At other times, members would encourage the involvement of young people in Paganism. It would be impossible consequently to characterise the whole group as holding a singular ideal. In this case, the key difference between the two approaches towards teen Witchcraft was in the way the discussions were framed, either as internal talk of member’s experiences or irritation at external subjects. Threads of outrage would always begin as a marked objection, either by a change of subject header from an ongoing discussion, or simply by beginning with an email expressing anger at a subject the author had encountered. They differed from the disagreements between members of the group, as the object of focus was always external, and usually triggered by some event such as the publication of a book, or a news item and would conclude with consensus between those posting. In fact, in every case examined, there was very little internal disagreement throughout the whole thread, the outrage being almost exclusively directed towards the non-member individual or group. Despite this, the conversations were less tempered and unmoderated either by the administrator or ordinary members.

If there was one topic that would be sure to generate a collective sense of outrage, and perhaps came closest to a singular character, it was Christian evangelism. Much of the time, Christianity was merely an object of humour, those of that faith being characterised as ‘do-gooders’ similar to the fluffy Pagans discussed previously. At times however, the more proselytising aspects of the religion would become the focus of group anger. The disgust shown towards this type of practice would immediately be reinforced by other members, via short messages of outrage. This was not a time for debate, but for simple disapproval of that group. These types of messages might be marked by a prefix to the subject title that would state, “please read” or “important”. They would consist of an extract from either an online news article or evangelical Christian website. Rarely did these exchanges discussed, centre on actual events affecting members of *British Pagans* directly. This would seem to discount to an extent the theories of threat and social identity salience proposed by studies in Social Psychology (Hogg, 1995). The lack of a direct external threat did, however, enable unmitigated stereotyping of Christian belief and behaviour. It is notable that on the occasion where one member reported being directly and physically threatened by an evangelical group (due to her identity as a Witch), the group responded in a similar way. Although the replies were longer, incorporating messages of support and advice, the ‘out-group’ was characterised as a homogenous threat to all members:

I've nothing against people having different and divers faiths
- it should be an inalienable right of the individual. I do,
however,
have a problem with preaching and evangalism - whatever the
religion. If you want God - go and find it. The rest of society
does
not need nutters and militants standing on street corners
haranguing
them (12569)

I do not appreciate American evangelists,
trying to convert people into their own
intolerant ways. (12568)

Christianity, then, was seemingly one homogenised 'outsider' that British Pagans as a whole used to strengthen its own identity. Yet much like the 'fluffy' Pagan, Christians themselves were not always objects of abhorrence. This can be understood when placed within Cohen's (1985) suggestion of symbolic boundary, discussed in Chapter One. The frequent postings of the Christian 'threat' are important to serve as a symbolic 'other', and the explicit evangelical behaviour can be referred to, constructing a boundary between 'us' and 'them'. This is the case whether Pagans versus Christians, or internally with 'serious' Pagans versus 'fluffies'. It is the defined behaviour of the out-group that becomes the boundary between the community and non-members, and not the individuals themselves.

The symbolically realised community as explicated by Cohen is not only constructed via references to imagined behaviour as above, but also by actual physical 'signs' distinguishing 'us' from 'them'. This was expressed within *British Pagans* in a discussion that took place about the archetypal Pagan jewellery, the Pentacle²⁵. Yet again, 'serious' Pagans were contrasted with Christians:

Yep, I wear my pentacle, but UNDER my shirt. Mind you this is slightly coloured by all the Christian happy clappy types who proudly wear their crosses as a badge of evangelism. I just don't want to be like that or seen to be like that. (Jack, 544)

Obviously in this context the symbols here are not actual material objects seen by the other group members. That a discussion takes place around the topic points to the

²⁵ A five-pointed star, often enclosed within a circle (Farrar, 1984).

significance of these physical signs in other contexts, but this message is also part of a debate centring on what it is to be a 'real' Pagan. Here Jack is making a statement about his identity that is swiftly reinforced by a response:

Yes again, I totaly agree with you here :)

I don't wish to be percieved as a happy clappy Pagan, but I am proud to be what & who I am. (Jack, 547)

This type of writing about identity is discussed further below, but this exchange additionally illustrates the frequency with which the objects of outrage, evangelistic and 'fluffy' behaviour, were invoked in the group.

Before leaving the theme of on-list anger, two related phenomenon should be mentioned, as they regularly emerge in studies of internet communication (Herring et al, 2002). These are 'trolling' and 'flaming', most commonly found in public newsgroups, including those with a Pagan theme such as alt.pagan or uk.religion.pagan. Due to the need for the moderator to screen potential members before they can post messages, and their ability to ban anyone they wish (with the exception of the list's other managers), trolling – the sending of messages with the sole purpose of inflaming other members²⁶ – was extremely rare in *British Pagans*. In the entire period studying the group, only once were some messages that were certain trolls sent, and the author was swiftly banned. However, there have been a number of 'flame wars' since the group's inception. These have, in comparison with other newsgroup flames, been relatively temperate. In fact, the most heated exchange occurred between Joanne and a newcomer who took resentment at her written 'tone'. In this particular instance, he left the group of his own accord, but occasions such as this allowed Joanne to resume her role as moderator by sending a sharp response, continuing even after he unsubscribed. Several other messages then sent messages of support, helping her to remain manager for some more months. Clearly, the overt administration of the group is one way in which status can be demonstrated, and overt anger provides a good focus for that role.

²⁶ http://horizon.unc.edu/projects/monograph/CD/Internet_Glossaries/lingo.asp#T

Support

The messages sent to Joanne after her administrative emails supported her position as official leader of the group. These messages fit into a genre of ‘supportive’ messages that is partly a continuation of the ongoing polemic of religious discrimination described above. These types of messages are usually in response to a request for help, however, such as an email requesting magical assistance in a given context. The reason for the request can be due to discrimination at work or elsewhere, in which case the response is usually words of support for the victims, or frequently, individuals ask for help with the medical problems of people close to them. In this latter case, the response is usually to state that healing ‘energy’ is being sent. These emails *always* receive a response, although they are rarely more than a few lines long. In a message entitled “Healing needed”, Hummingbird asked for help after she found out that her boyfriend was engaged to another woman. The supportive response she received from “Silvershade” was typical of this type of message:

Awww Babe!
Happy thoughts and Cyber hugz!
You'll be ok hun. (Silvershade, 11492)

Supportive messages such as these would fulfil the role of creating a sense of togetherness, as characterised by Zigmunt Bauman (2001) in his argument that community is

a ‘warm’ place, a cosy and comfortable place [...] in the community,
we can relax – we are safe, there are no dangers looming in the dark
(Bauman, 2001: 1-2).

If this is the case, it must only be a transient state of safety, as these messages like others, can occasionally lead to heated argument. In this example, an argument followed, after a suggestion in a supportive message to Hummingbird that, “all men are scum” (11493). Despite this, different ways of giving support to each other were practiced by individuals on the list, such as informing people in need of various ways in which magic can be used to aid them, and frequently stating that they will perform magic the same night as receiving a message of distress.

Information/Forwardings

Since the inception of the list, some of the messages have been in the form of forwarded information relevant to Paganism. These may be emails giving details of upcoming moots or Pagan conferences, but may also be messages forwarded from other Pagan lists. From the very beginning the member to post these most frequently was Phillip, who by the end of the period of study would send two or three per week, at times the only messages the list received. During the most active period, however, these types of messages were sent by several of the active members, including those who were not ‘administrating’. These types of messages are notable as they would rarely receive a reply, yet were continually sent to the list. The question must be asked, what did these messages do in this context? By examining which emails did receive replies, it is possible to perceive a relatively consistent pattern, related to their content and their form.

Messages about upcoming moots were rarely replied to onlist. Eventually, when the hosting moved from *egroups.com* to *yahoo.com* these types of message became an automatic feature of the group’s online calendar. New moots would be announced if hosted by an online member and occasionally these messages led to brief discussions about times and locations. News items involving Pagans received occasional messages of agreement, and at times disgust. Messages that were forwarded from other Pagan lists and that usually gave information about current news events themselves, invariably received some sort of reply, similar to directly sent news items. In terms of their format, other than the announcements of conferences or moots, information messages are consistently the same. At the top of the message is a sentence that refers briefly to the forwarded information below. The rest of the email is a direct, unedited copy of a news article (often with advertisements and unrelated links from the original included). Should one of these messages receive a reply, this is when editing occurs, and subsequently fits into the pattern explored above in relation to treatises and debate. These information emails can be considered to act as occasional catalysts for conversation, leading to debate, outrage, or treatises. They were the constant backbone of *British Pagans* activity, there to trigger conversation if emails declined.

Knowledge and Authenticity

It is feasible that sending information messages such as those described in the section above is one way in which a member can assert their commitment, or at the very least make the other members aware of their membership. In other words, a state of ‘being there’, thereby avoiding ‘lurking’. The fact that even these forwarding emails were sent by only the active members who posted regularly suggests that the norm of no lurking did not extend to every registered member. More profoundly, it raises the question of just what ‘membership’ of the community actually consisted of. What does a regular email of forwarded information actually do? By consistently providing information related to Pagan belief in the open view of other members of the list, individuals are able to illustrate the endurance of their Pagan identity. Should this develop into a debate or heated discussion, it allows more opportunity to explore ‘being Pagan’ with others.

One such debate that took place in June 2000 began with a request for information on obtaining a Chinese Tarot deck. After a comment from Alex that he preferred to use the Runes for divination, it soon became a relatively impassioned debate about sexual energies in the two types of divinatory apparatus:

Sorry to disagree with you but this isn't my eyes is a load of hogwash. I have been using the Tarot for 15 Yrs now and in all that time I may have tried the runes but could never get my mind into gear with them. I know a few guys in my acquaintance to feel the same way . What does everyone else think?

(George 10227)

This comment from George, who felt that a generalisation made by Freefox, that “There is a definite ‘Female - tarot, Male – runes’ magical correlation”, is a typical example of *British Pagans* debate discussed earlier. Davis and Brewer (1997) in their study of electronic discourse suggest that “multilayered” writing on their study list would receive more attention from the other members. George’s response can also be considered to be multilayered in its shifts of audience and its personal disclosure. The message begins with a direct reply to Alex, but tempered with the opener “Sorry to disagree with you”. After giving evidence for his claim, including referring to external support, he opens the discussion to the other members. In doing so, George is able to disagree strongly with

Alex's perceived "hogwash", and immediately request support from different members. Disagreements were often resolved in this way, layering direct address with additional information and subsequently redirecting to a different set of subjects. Freefox's reply is also typical in that the evidence given is experiential and personal, rather than academically quoted, as in treatise emails:

In reply:-) There's no "arcane mysteries" involved, it's just something I've "noticed in general", if you see what I mean. (Freefox 10235)

In discussions, this type of personal experience was frequently given as evidence to support an argument. Here Freefox is suggesting that his own experience of practicing Paganism has informed him in enough depth to make an evaluation. If a 'norm' is to be found it is that to members of *British Pagans*, personal experience can be as persuasive as quoted news or forwarded Pagan information. In fact, some of the lengthiest discussions would contain more personal experience than quotes from external sources. This is important for two reasons. Firstly, quoting personal experience helps avoid direct conflict, as this type of evidence would not be challenged on-list. Member's own experience was considered to be valid and respected. Heated disagreements arose of course, but more often than not these emerged from misunderstandings of text. It was when this combined with the second issue, that of 'identity', that a disagreement would become an argument that at times resulted in members leaving the group. Secondly, and related to first point, the expression of experience can be considered to be an articulation of one's Pagan identity.

It appears that research into interactions over the internet cannot be complete without at least a brief exploration of the notion of identity and authenticity. Previous studies have discussed the distinction between a user's 'real' identity and that presented online (Turkle, 1995, 1996; Walker, 2000;), including an exploration of real 'bodies' on the internet (Stone, 1995). Hine (2000) devotes an entire chapter to the concept of authenticity in various internet settings and persuasively rejects the contrast between authentic interaction offline and inauthentic online communication. She then suggests that authenticity might be made the topic of analysis, exploring the ways in which the inhabitants of a virtual community understand and manage the issue. The argument that a crisis of authenticity should not be assumed *a priori* is convincing when the *British Pagans* list is analysed. It appears that for the members of the group, authenticity was not generally in crisis in the

existential sense. Members did not give any evidence that they suspected the authors of messages to be different from the people they claimed to be in terms of gender, age or occupation. It is more apparent, as evidenced in the messages of Phillip and others who were encountered in the list and in physical settings, that while the character of their communication online and offline was dissimilar at times, this was shaped predominantly by the constraints of the medium and not by any radical change in their 'identity'. Nevertheless, while individual identity might not be challenged, a more subtle criticism of an individual's Pagan authenticity was occasionally brought by members themselves. Authenticity in this respect can be a topic of study.

If a member is to justify their position as belonging to a Pagan group, they must show that they are indeed an authentic Pagan. There are two ways in which this was achieved; via relevant information and news forwarded messages, and by referring to one's own experience and practice. We can consider both of these as expressions of two types of Pagan 'knowledge' – theoretical and experiential – both of which were presented on-list in different types of exchange. Consider the following extract from a discussion that began with a treatise on the magical use of Egyptian godforms, but was soon interpreted differently:

Why did you bother asking me what I knew of Sekhmet etc if you already
knew, was it simply in order to display your greater knowledge?
(Neel 10031)

There was no intention on my part to belittle you[...] I have been
deeply involved in what might be termed Maatian Metaphysics for
some time now. I have also worked with the Sekhmet telos in
connection with the Fiery Energy (Sexual Energy) of the South.
(Abraxas 10079)

Here Abraxas called upon his Pagan experience to answer the charge given by Neel. Interestingly, despite this discussion being about ancient gods and goddesses, it centred on the practical knowledge of the participants. This is seen in Abraxas' statement that he "worked with the Sekhmet telos..." Prior to these two emails the text had been in the form of an academic discourse on mythic gods:

Sekhmet and Ma'at were sister-Goddesses. Ma'at was the dispenser
of Justice known in some places as the Scales of Truth. Sekhmet,

the lioness headed Goddess is the Creator of Destruction and Change and according to legend she would kill & eat those that Ma'at pronounced guilty or administer an alternative punishment suitable.

(Neel 10009)

It is possible to see then that both forms of knowledge were able to take place within one discussion thread, shifting between the two as the topic became general or personal. Additionally, by describing his past involvement with “Maatian Metaphysics” as well as his current practice, Solaris presents an image of himself that suggests coherence and continuity of identity, both important features of narrative, discussed in the next chapter.

The conflict above between Neel and Abraxas was resolved quickly by referring to respected personal experience. Knowledge claims could be more serious, however, when they moved from debates around Pagan information, to focus on the actual authenticity of one's Pagan identity. This was the case in the most serious episode of conflict in the group's history that occurred at the end of 1999 and ended with the resignation of a member from the list. In his final email he summarised several points that had emerged in previous messages, including revisiting an older conflict between Joanne and Phillip:

You [Joanne] are obviously another female on a power trip, Phillip spotted that you are just a beginner and was temporarily banned for more or less saying just that, do you want some proof that you are?

Lets start with your age, you're 26 and say you have been practicing the craft for 7 years, that would make you 19 when you started. In another post you told everyone that your mother taught you. I mean 19 is rather late for her to start teaching you don't you think? Was she eclectic Wiccan?

[...]

Even true Wiccans (Gardnerians) don't recognise unintiated witchy

wannabe`s so it looks like you will have to continue to rely on the book writers such as your mate Jenny for your BOS, but please stop calling yourself an Eclectic Witch, you are not a Witch.
(Wolf 923)

This damning attack on the authenticity of Joanne`s Paganism, carefully taking apart her history is a clear example of the breaking of the group`s norm. Just as Phillip had caused offence previously by questioning Joanne`s Witchcraft training and subsequently being banned, so here Wolf does exactly the same thing and leaves the group. These two occasions when the norm of respecting other`s personal experience was not followed were the most unstable times in the list.

Authenticity could also be expressed in other ways due to the specific online context of *British Pagans*, but this brought with it additional challenges. The first of these is that the simple act of choosing a pseudonym could be overridden by the software employed by users. `Magical` or Pagan names were common on the list. In fact, once the group moved to *yahoo.com* a unique username had to be chosen and many stated that their `internet` name was also their Pagan `magical` name. Nevertheless, should an individual wish to hide their own birth name, they would have to take several steps in order to prevent the header section of their emails displaying it, including altering the settings on their own email software. Perhaps as a consequence, some members chose to use both their usual offline name and their pseudonym in messages. This had the effect that within one email there could be three methods of referring to the author: by the first part of their email address, by their header name, or by the name which they use to sign the message. The author therefore had a degree of scope in which they could present themselves before any actual message has been written. If the author had a reasonably high level of competence in setting up their email account, they could decide how to manage the initial impression that they give. For example, the member who signed himself as `Abraxas` had either chosen not to, or was unable to change his message header which presumably was his birth-given name. Yet despite this, his choice of Pseudonym immediately reflected some of his interests in the field of the Occult.

A final feature, distinctive to email messages and used by members of *British Pagans*, was the automatic `signature file`, a line or selection of lines of text that can be set to automatically attach itself to the bottom of any emails sent to the list. These often took the

form of quotations, gleaned from other email messages, or from specialist websites²⁷, and are used to present some form of ‘wisdom’, world-truth or humour. Of course, in addition to this, these lines exhibit some aspect of identity that can be associated with the author. The attachments change over time, but usually they remain unchanged for several weeks. Examples ranged from a single line such as, “Do not meddle in the affairs of Dragons as thou art crunchy and good with ketchup”, to full stanzas from poems that speak to the commonality of Pagans:

Wind to thy wings,
The Fire in thine heart,
Water to bless thee,
From Earth do we start,
The Goddess she watches,
The Horned God doth wait,
For us to gain senses,
Before it's too late.
For they try to guide us,
In the things that we choose,
In saving the future,
To triumph, not lose.

Public-private Chat

Emails sent to the list were not always ‘on-topic’. In fact, as stated previously, many times during the day, people would enter into brief and often humorous exchanges. These were often only three or four sentences long and would consist of a forwarded joke, a complaint about their boss, or simply a ‘one-liner’ quotation. At times, particularly during working hours, these would make up the majority of list traffic. These types of exchanges tell us two things about the way online communication worked in the group. The first of these is that despite *British Pagans* being a community in virtual space, physical location remains a very important concern. People would refer to their present location in their email, whether talking about their working place, or events that have taken place with neighbours. For example, in the case of a message about a humorous

²⁷ See for example, <http://www.quoteland.com>.

signature file that one member had noticed, she stated that she had first seen it on a t-shirt in her home town. Of course, location was important in the majority of list messages, especially in information messages about moots and conferences, introductory messages by new members, and even emails about one's own personal experiences.

The second feature of the off-topic 'chats', is that they were not always directed towards the group as a whole. These brief exchanges would sometimes take place between two people, marked by the name of the recipient in the subject line of the message. They were private conversations, but in full view of all the other members. A typical example is this message from Jayne, arranging a meeting with Jenny:

From: "Jayne" <jayne@...>

Date: Wed Nov 3, 1999 11:15 pm

Subject: Re:Jenny

Perhaps I could see some of your work next time that I see you?
Both Sundays are okay with me so far, as long as I can get home earlyish.

I got sent home from work this morning since I had been throwing up since about 5am, and proceeded to have another sick bout at work *groan* I think it's food poisoning.

Bright and Blessed Be
~Aura~

This sort of message seemingly does not need to be on the list. The communication is between only Jayne and Jenny, yet is received by everyone subscribed to the group. These private messages in public space were particularly common in the most active period but continued through all of the study period. It can be recognised that although these messages were private, very occasionally another member would join in the conversation. This occurred in the above conversation where another member suggested a remedy for sickness. The advantage of holding private conversations publicly, then, is that it affords the opportunity for others to join if they wish. Additionally, the participants of these threads are actively 'being there' in the community space, in much the same way as one would be at a moot or other physical Pagan gathering.

History

The thread referred to earlier, which dealt with the Egyptian goddesses Sekhmet and Maat, illustrates how past conversations can become a resource in the present. In the Sekhmet thread, a discussion took place in which differing views about the goddesses were aired until a compromise was found. This was possible because of the level of available literature on such subjects and, as stated, the group norm of respecting personal experience. The internet is a perfect medium for rapid access to electronic texts, and a high number of messages in this thread contained hyperlinks to sites containing Pagan information and texts. This information and that given by the members themselves can be used as a reference in future discussions. This is made more tangible by the process of archiving of messages on the host site, in addition to the ability of members to upload information files to the pages which could then be accessed by any of the membership.

In another sense the activities of the members are also archived. *British Pagans* has been in existence for four years at the time of writing and therefore many of the longer-term members have a shared past together, based predominantly on their interaction ‘on-list’. This history emerges in references to previous discussions and events throughout the various ongoing threads and often these will become topics of conversation themselves. An example is a thread that took place about marihuana, using the terms “chocolate cake” or “tofu” to describe the drug. This stems from a period in the list’s history when Freefox was moving house to Amsterdam and invited some of the members to join him for a holiday in the future. The discussion moved onto the legalised use of Cannabis in Amsterdam, and subsequently members referred to the thread affectionately, as it is part of the collective memory of the group. By recounting aspects of the thread, the authors present their long-lived involvement with the group. This emphasises their previous history together subsequently reiterating a sense of continuity.

Demise of the Group

Not long after Joanne banned Phillip from the group (only to readmit him later), she mysteriously disappeared, sending no messages for several weeks. Eventually another member emailed the list to inform everyone that although Joanne had been ill with

depression, she would be back. She did return again but soon after disappeared for good, leaving Phillip as the owner of *British Pagans*. After this time, the group never again reached the same levels of activity, and after 2000 the number of messages decreased dramatically to settle at a constant level for the following three years. Phillip continues to moderate the list along with one other email group to the present day. Under his ownership, the list has retained the same structure as it had in its beginning months. For example, the “no lurking” rule has survived along with a “no spam” (junk mail) statement appearing at the bottom of every email sent to the group. At the time of writing, the group has become quiet, with very few messages sent weekly. No new members have joined within the last two months, news items forwarded by Phillip have not been replied to and private on-list chat has ceased. Although a direct connection cannot be made, at the very same time another list has been formed, with a more regional focus, and the active members from *British Pagans* are now members of that list. Message activity declined on one list and rose on the other after an email was posted to announce the formation of the local list. As the active members of *British Pagans* such as Phillip and Bob live within the region served by the new list, we can suggest that this list addresses a need for locally-based chat. Indeed, the new list is functioning in very much the same way *British Pagans* did when it first began. This could point to the temporary nature of this type of email-based community, but more persuasively, the community has simply moved to another space.

Conclusion – Identity, Virtuality and Community

It is tempting, when first beginning an exploration of interaction online, to start with the assumption that the medium is in some ways ‘everything’. The fascination with new technologies may focus one’s attention onto the medium and away from the action of its users. As Grint and Woolgar clearly assert in the beginning of their text on technology and organization,

We take issue with implicit assumption that some inherent property or characteristic of technology accounts for the impact of technology on our lives. We propose instead that the myriad other aspects of our relation with technology must be taken into account if we are to achieve a useful understanding of its consequences. (Grint and Woolgar, 1997: 6)

This is as true for the internet as it is for any other technology. The users of the medium are people, not machines, and as such it is a *social* space. Actors interact with each other using similar skills to those used in other environments. However, as we have seen, there are elements of this context that are different to those of the others studied in earlier chapters.

In studying an online Pagan email list, we have seen how, in the organisation and management of an online community, the opportunities for individual members to position themselves as individuals with status are multiple and complex. This is in no small part due to the limitations imposed by the technology and software used to host the group, allowing some members to maintain an authoritative role. It is interesting that, in this respect, we might consider the online 'virtual' community studied to be more 'traditional' in its apparent structured hierarchical character. This is ironic, in the light of debates about the internet pushing cultures towards late or postmodern fragmentation (Fornas, 1998). Related to this, we can conclude that it is difficult, if not impossible, to generalise simplistically about 'virtual community'. The individuals on *British Pagans* behave differently, use different resources and styles than other groups, such as that one studied by Davis and Brewer (1997). Nevertheless, it is improbable that similarities do not exist. The information-laden environment of *British Pagans*, complete with regular hyperlinks to external sources, is similar to other internet forums, for example.

A more detailed examination of the messages shows patterns that are distinct to this list. The group norm of respecting personal experience and the regularity with which this was invoked to resolve conflict is one example; the aggression shown towards 'fluffy' Pagans and Evangelical Christians are others. Walker (2000), in her analysis of internet home pages, suggests that although the internet may shape the form and manner by which identity statements are used, these statements are not determined by it. In this chapter we have seen that this is also a valid description of email groups. In a similar vein, although members may use the collective knowledge of the group as a resource in their on-list interaction, they also refer to their off-list practices. This is reinforced with references to other knowledge, which may have been collected from either the internet, or off-list activities. Knapp (in Porter, 1996) has noted that on the internet, debate is no-longer confined by 'scientific' experts, although reference may be made to them to strengthen an argument. In the case of this list, it has been shown that while there were no explicitly 'scientific' references, many of the discussions did enter into similarly shaped discourses.

particularly when the content was about religious heritage, as was the case in Abraxis' messages about Sekhmet. Perhaps the internet more noticeably than other settings is where aspects of expertise become significant.

A 'physical' space such as a moot setting enables small groups to form, break away from any central leadership, and yet remain part of the larger community. In an online community, and particularly a 'closed' one such as the list studied here, it is more difficult to be separate yet part of the whole. Although private conversations can take place 'off-list', the boundaries between these private exchanges and the on-list public ones are more firm than in physical Pagan settings. While the movement from public to private is easy – i.e. members can at any time begin private interchanges – it is not possible for other members to simply 'drift' between the two. We have seen therefore that another type of communication, the 'publicly private' interchanges, produce a similar environment to a moot. This is but one of the boundaries walked along in *British Pagans*. It has also been possible to see that in a space without location – in this case the internet – location remains important. This is both on a pragmatic scale, in that individuals connected from their home or work, but also location arises in the online talk. Both a technocratic observation and a social one can therefore be made.

There is a question that remains to be dealt with: what of continuity? Are communities on the internet unstable and easily fragmented? The observations of the list suggest that this is not necessarily the case. Despite the fact that *British Pagans* only lasted a few years before its demise, the individual members are continuing to communicate in the same manner on another list. Therefore, rather than a fragmented community, it is a mobile one. The coherence was not brought about via a grounding in physical space, but through the use of the group's cultural resources. These resources are an understanding of how to interact and debate, and a continually developing group history that emerged in references to past events. Debate and discussion, combined with some common reference points such as the themes of anti-discrimination and defamation, and a perceived desire for 'serious' Paganism, allow members to show commitment to the group.

It has been argued that the internet is capable of transforming Identity and questioning authenticity (Gergen, 1991; Turkle, 1995). This chapter has shown that these issues cannot be explored simply as they emerge in different ways within the member's own text. The 'authentic Pagan' arose in discussions about 'fluffies' and arguments about Pagan

training. Fundamentally, however, no one authentic Pagan ‘identity’ can be found, as members in this community use the space for different purposes. Some position themselves as knowledgeable members of the community, using skills of information forwarding, treatises and debate in this regard. Some members take on the role of administrators, using this position to attempt to mould the group as they wish, but inevitably failing to do so. Finally, some members do not seem to be part of the active community at all, but ‘lurk’ in the background, perhaps reading the messages, but perhaps not. It is consequently impossible to characterise either the community or the members as one type.

This leads us to a final conclusion about community in this context. Just as individuals use the technology and the environment in different ways, so the technology has differing effects on individual users. The fact cannot be ignored, for example, that Phillip, the once excluded member who rose to become the owner and manager of the *British Pagans* list, is also in a position of leadership in the wider ‘physical’ Pagan community. He organises and runs a moot, has been deeply involved in the organisation of Pagan camps and is a regular speaker at conferences. The interaction between the two spaces consequently cannot be removed from the account. Phillip used the space as an extension of his offline position, but some members claimed that the group was the only chance that they had to be openly Pagan. The quotation at the beginning of this chapter was an extreme case of the effects of the internet on some Pagans. It is the range of these effects, however, the range of the uses of ICTs, and the various online communicative styles that go towards answering the question of how contemporary community is done.

Part III: Doing a Pagan Identity in Narrative

Self-Accounts

Chapter Seven: Doing a Pagan Identity in Narrative Self-Accounts

Introduction

In all the environments where Pagans meet and interact as strangers, invariably some conversations will revolve around how individuals came to be interested in Paganism or simply came to ‘be’ Pagan. The talk will include references to different ‘paths’ and may, should the paths differ, provoke further inquiry into each of the speakers practices. Identity presented in the form of a narrative (Plummer, 1995, 2001; Collins, 2003) is as common in Pagan conversation as it is in any other social setting. Stories of oneself are part of contemporary culture in Britain and their telling is one aspect that can work towards community. As Ken Plummer has stated, “stories need communities to be heard, but communities themselves are also built through story tellings” (Plummer, 1995: 174). This chapter takes this as its starting point, and explores the ways in which Pagans present themselves when asked to do so in the context of giving a life story. Like previous chapters, it begins with a brief discussion of context and methodology. Then, once an introduction to the concepts of narrative and the analytical categories of story and argument are presented, the chapter moves on to present the results of analysis into interviews with several British Pagans. In doing so, the processes at work within their narratives are explored, finally leading to a discussion that relates these to community and the broader themes of the thesis.

Context and Definitions

A total of thirteen separate life-story interviews were conducted with Pagans from the Northtown moot, a Pagan camp and the *British Pagans* email list. This enabled a comparison between individuals who identify as Pagan in the differing contexts explored so far, giving space for a grounded analytical study of Pagan narrative. The discussion below emerged from repeated analysis and revisiting of recordings as further life-stories were collected, narrowing focus to find patterned consistencies; it is possible therefore to

assert that this can be extended not least to other Pagans, but beyond this to other members of late modern communities. This point will be addressed at the end of the chapter.

All Pagan life stories are different. It would be naive and erroneous to assert otherwise. Individuals have different experiences in their lives, are subjected to different physical, emotional and social influences that shape the development of identity and understanding of self (Stevens, 1996). Yet, in spite of these historical variations, there exists a patterning in the way that our previous experience can be told to others. Bruner (1987) went so far as to suggest that via an analysis of autobiographies, it may be possible to unravel the narrative nature of thought, arguing that it is only through narrative that *lived* life can be described:

Eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very ‘events’ of a life. In the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives. (Bruner, 1987:15).

Other psychologists (eg. Josselson, 1995) have adopted this position, suggesting that narrative analysis is a method to understand the ‘dialogic self’ – that constructionist conception of a self always in dialogue, constantly ‘in process’ (Shotter, 1993; Sampson, 1993) and indebted to the literary analysis of Mikhail Bakhtin (Todorov, 1984; de Peuter, 1998; Shotter and Billig, 1998). Yet, Bruner himself, the strong proponent of narrative visions of the self as he is, does not go so far as to suggest that there are no ‘real’ experiences in life, stating instead that “we may properly suspect that the shape of a life as *experienced* is as much dependent upon the narrative skills of the autobiographer as is the story he or she tells about it” (Bruner, 1995).

Nevertheless, it would be tempting to examine these diverse, perhaps even self-contradictory stories and attempt to combine them into a tidy ‘Pagan’ type. This has been attempted in the past, and continues to be so. Adler (1986) for example, examined the pre-pagan past given by American Pagans and noted that their previous religious persuasion was in line with the national religious picture. Luhrmann (1989) continued in a similar vein, attempting to generate ‘a portrait of the practitioners’, noting their love of mythic novels and their personality traits as being “imaginative, self-absorbed, reasonably

intellectual, spiritually inclined, and emotionally intense” (Luhrmann, 1989:108). Other authors have characterised Pagans as people with personalities ranging from severely traumatised (Rabinovich, 2000) to potential feminist liberators (Greenwood, 1996). Certainly, any type of categorisation such as these presents enormous difficulties in application. This chapter, rather than attempting to assert that British Pagans have commonalties in their past that somehow coerce them towards taking up Pagan belief and practice, takes as its focus the ways of telling identity. It therefore becomes unnecessary to establish patterns of ontologically objective historical events, instead seeking patterns of identity constructed through talk. The multitudinous past experiences, whatever and however different they were, consequently can be seen to serve as resources from which speakers draw to construct their stories.

It will be seen that the narrative form is one way in which Pagans can present a coherent self. The telling of a story necessitates a selection of a limited number out of all possible recallable events, a selection of descriptive terms for them, and an assembly of them into a construction in which the events can be understood as mutually related as well as chronologically ordered. It is done to constitute an appropriate action within its local setting. In telling a life story, where the teller is herself the main protagonist and an object of evaluation (Linde 1993), the teller creates a self-identity that will be heard as understandable, in other words coherent, and appropriate to the setting in which the story is told. For the purposes of clarity in this chapter, the definition of narrative is taken to be “accounts that offer some scheme, either implicitly or explicitly, for organizing and understanding the relation of objects and events described” (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997:147). More technically in the following analysis, ‘narrative’ is defined as an extended section of talk, “in which a chronologically ordered content told in the past tense is prevalent, and in which the contents are united by a single stance and a dominant theme” (Andrle, 2000: 218). Using this definition, the narrative passages in the interviews were invariably contained within the first half of the recording, later followed by shorter stories and arguments. The analysis examined the interviews in their entirety, but the narrative was the principle focus after it became clear that it was in this section that much of the work of constructing a Pagan identity was done. Nevertheless, as will be demonstrated, the work of shorter stories, reports and arguments is fundamental in understanding how an individual can demonstrate belonging to unstable community.

Three of the life narratives analysed will be used most frequently in this chapter in order to present a relatively clear discussion. Any of those collected could be used, but the three chosen are useful as they are exemplary in illustrating the constructive practices of telling a Pagan identity in narrative settings. The three people are Neil, Anne and Jim. Within their local Pagan communities they have differing levels of exposure and status. Anne, for example, is involved in the organisation of two separate moots. Neil runs his own group, but rarely attends moots, instead finding Pagan links on the internet. Jim tends not to attend moots at all, but is involved in other ways with the organisation of Paganism. It would have been possible to use these differences in status as a point of departure for analysis, but rather than begin with a categorisation, the interviews were examined to find similarities in patterns of narrative practice between all of them. This subsequently exposes the types of speech practices that all the members interviewed used.

Neil is a twenty-five year old male living in the south of England. He lives in a fashionably decorated house with his boyfriend and a small dog. He contacted me quickly after receiving my request for interviewees on the Pagan mailing list, giving me some brief details that included the fact that he runs a small Pagan group. Prior to beginning the interview at his home, Neil gave more information about the group, stating that it had not yet been running “properly” for more than a year, but included a relatively famous Pagan author in the region, who had been helping him with his dream of becoming a writer. He also gave a tour of the house, pointing out the small Pagan symbols such as ‘corn dollies’ hung on the walls. This highlighting of visual Pagan markers was not unusual; in fact prior to many interviews this occurred. We can see this as a method of setting the scene, making clear the reasons for the interview and acknowledging that they are aware of the position of me as researcher. Perhaps this is also ‘testing the waters’ to see just how much mutual understanding there exists between the two of us, and is, therefore exploring the identity to which one must orient oneself.

Anne, in contrast to Neil, is much older. She is 48, living in the north of England with her younger boyfriend, a Pagan who accompanies her to the moots and camps. I was known to her from the Northtown moot, which she used to attend before her move to another city that briefly became the centre of gossip between the moot’s members as recounted in Chapter Four. At the time of interviewing, she was still involved in the running of two moots – one in a pub in the centre of her present home city, and one back in Northtown. Her health was a constant concern, and many of the appointments set for the interview

were changed at the last moment, due to hospital visits or trips to her local GP. Fortunately for Anne, her partner appears to do a great deal of the housework and shopping, and although the relationship appears volatile, at the same time it functions well. This was highlighted by the small arguments that occurred while I was at their home.

The final life story that will be used at length is that given by Jim, a middle-aged male, who has been involved in Paganism for many years. He was introduced to me as the ‘guru’ of another interviewee who had asked for him to be present while I interviewed her. I took the opportunity to interview him on the same day. He lives in an industrial town in the north of England and is heavily involved with the local university ‘mystical society’, something that he stated he established over a decade ago.

Extracts from other interviewees will be included in the following analysis when they provide extremely clear examples of the phenomenon under discussion.

***We all came from the Goddess...*²⁸**

In *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves*, Pike (2001) argues that telling stories is one way in which Pagans situate themselves in relation to others at festivals. The festival is a space where stories can be shared, which confirm and strengthen one’s identity in relation to others.

Neopagans produce identity narratives as they are living them out at festivals. A woman who attends a sweat-lodge ritual for the first time and listens to the stories and songs of the sweat-lodge leader, ‘remembers’ experiences from her past that resonate with the ritual. She describes her past during the sweat, and these memories then become part of her identity. (Pike, 2001:156)

British Pagans fit this pattern at camps in the UK, giving stories to each other around the camp-fire or at each other’s tents. The moots are also spaces where, via the telling of Pagan narratives, people can build a sense of shared belonging. Clearly, talk like this – narratives that express one’s own identity and history – are important building blocks in

²⁸ This title is taken from the name of a well known Pagan chant I heard recited at a festival. It summarises not only a proscribed Pagan ‘theology’ (*Feminist Collections: A Quarterly of Women's Studies Resources*, Vol.23, 4), but also aptly describes a notion of shared history and belongingness.

the generation of community memory. The life-story interview is a space where stories that may have been regularly given in other settings are woven together, and it is this process of weaving together that is interesting. As Pike puts it, “it is not the facts of the story, but the self-construction that takes place in story-telling that is the most significant cultural act” (Pike, 2001:156).

What is the primary enigma that a contemporary British Pagan has to face when orientating themselves in telling their story to an interviewer? We can assert that it is no different to that faced by any member of a late modern community: the enigma of individuation in an unstable collective. Yet there are some differences that relate especially to contemporary Pagans. Essentially, we can see three processes at work. The Pagan must first locate themselves as ‘a member’ of something larger than themselves – the symbolic community that in a very fundamental sense gives them their ‘Pagan’ identity. Secondly, due to the heightened importance of individualism in late modernity, they must assert their particularity in that community. Yet, all of this must be done while maintaining their identity as part of wider British culture, a culture that may be at odds with the given ideology of Paganism presented by the speaker. These three processes – identifying Pagan membership, gaining individuation and reasserting wider cultural belonging – form the basis of analysis for the rest of this chapter, as they emerge in the four primary story themes: anchoring in the past, coming home, stories of magical efficacy, and ‘reaching out’ stories.

Anchoring in the Past

Childhood

At the beginning of her interview, Anne, like all the other interviewees, began with her experiences of childhood. This was due in no small part to the method used to open the interview, which suggested marking significant points in life on a timeline then leading to a discussion of those points. Childhood is an obvious place to start a life story; it allows one to set the scene and mention biographical details such as age and parentage, thus functioning as a base level upon which to build the narrative. However, in these interviews it often took on a more significant role, being the location of the first key story, with introductions of significant characters and scenarios. This story would also

invariably contain a motif that would form the anchor to the rest of the narrative. By way of example, let us look at how Anne began:

“My first experiences with Paganism, were quite young. Although not the Paganism you know of it as today. I was brought up by my granny, and um my granny was a great one for telling stories, you know folk tales and um... I was brought up with all these traditional folk tales and stories and... spent a lot of time in the company of, really old people.” (Anne:00.15)

These were the first words spoken in the interview, yet immediately Anne has introduced many themes including the importance of tradition, ‘different’ Paganism, and wisdom of ageing. These are themes that continue throughout her narrative and will be returned to later in this chapter. At this juncture, however, we can note that there is a cliché within Pagan culture: the ‘initiation by grandmother’ tale. This is a report one hears given time and time again between Pagans at gatherings and has gained mythic status. It is interesting as it is used both to discredit the validity of another’s Paganism yet is also used as a defence to suggest authenticity of one’s own practices. It appeared in the life stories of several other interviewees in various forms ranging from brief comments such as “I was always close to my Nan” (Jane: 01.19) to more involved reports such as that given by Anne above. We can assume that Anne is aware of the clichéd nature of her story, yet this does not prevent her from delivering it. It is also quite possible that this story has been rehearsed before, in the common ‘how did you discover Paganism’ discussions recounted at Pagan gatherings. This would not be unexpected; during Anne’s interview I was struck by the relative ease with which she told her life story. As Gubrium, Holstein and Buckholdt (1994) argue, biographical ‘work’ – which in this context can be understood as being the work of giving a narrative in an interview –is “the ongoing effort to integrate accounts of a person’s life” (Gubrium et al, 1994:156). These accounts, dialogic and inharmonious as they may be, will, through their repetitive telling, have become increasingly consistent²⁹.

The opening sentences given by Neil were consistent with those of Anne. He too makes the claim that his childhood was a time where he was exposed to Pagan influences, although these were only implicitly held in the traditions of his school:

²⁹ We could also note that Anne’s relative seniority of age may contribute somewhat to her ability to ‘tell a good story’.

“I was quite fortunate that I went to, well I lived in xxxx [...] and the school I went to, my infant school, was still quite villagey well it’s not like that now, but it was still quite a village-type school, and we had the maypole dancing, and we had the, we rolled eggs down the hills...” (Neil: 00.05)

Immediately following this he states that at the time these were “just village customs”, but “now they’d be considered Pagan”. This is interesting and significant in the context of this thesis, as it demonstrates an awareness of the (re)construction of Paganism and its temporal instability. He does not, for example, state that, “they were *really* Pagan”.

Several points can thus be made about this short utterance. Firstly, in no way could it be argued that he is in this opening to his life-story, making a claim for a stable coherent and bounded group to which he is a member. In fact, quite the opposite is true. Secondly, it may be asserted that this also shows awareness of interviewer’s position as knowledgeable ‘outsider’ – one who may be aware of the incoherence of the Pagan community. Finally, this is evidence for the uncertainty and ongoing reflexivity in narrative.

Neil’s introduction then continues, revealing more about his childhood. The area where he grew up was extremely rural, with very few opportunities for entertainment other than spending time in the natural landscape. “You had to use your imagination quite a lot as a child” (Neil :00.55). This ‘deprivation’ is seen by Neil to have stimulated his mind towards Paganism in later life. The move to his next school imposed even more difficulties, as there was no maypole, or folk customs, no opportunity for play.

Importantly for Neil, this was the period in his life where religion, in the form of Anglican Christianity, played an increasingly powerful role. He had been a regular church-goer since his early childhood, and this continued throughout his move to another town and schools. This religion is characterised in a way that contrasts heavily with his descriptions of folk practices and the imaginative, active behaviour that he engaged in. The church in his first village was old and musty, being made from stone and wood - “it stank of church” (Neil: 01.35), in his words. The wooden pews were small, hard and uncomfortable, and he and his brother used to sit on the floor, peering through the wooden carvings, and then being scolded for the action. This period of his life was one in which his youthful active mind was repressed, yet he managed to express himself despite this. In fact, the struggle against ‘the church’ forms the primary theme of his life-story. Pike (2001) draws the conclusion from her own research that “neopagan childhood stories are narratives of loss and redemption in which childhood embodies the storyteller’s most profound ideals and

desires” (Pike, 2001: 156). Clearly, we could attach this description to Neil’s opening story, yet this does not fit so well with all those interviewed.

A case in point is the first story to appear in Jim’s narrative. He, like all the others, begins with his childhood, again using this as the space within which to orient his main theme. We can give a meaning condensation (Kvale, 1996) of his account, summarising how he presented his identity in the 90 minute interview:

I am a thoughtful, curious individual who since a young age has been drawn towards the Pagan path. Through my own experiences and feelings, emerging from paranormal phenomena, in addition to my extensive reading of myths and legends as a child, I have found a way to celebrate my spirituality in a way suitable for my character. Paganism has helped me overcome deep depression, and I hope this will continue in the future, allowing my own Pagan practices to develop.

This narrative is plainly different in theme to that given by Neil. He does not appear to suggest a deep rebellion against an external agency such as the church. Although he was a regular church attendee as a young child, by the age of ten he had become increasingly accepting of the idea that “if God exists, then they all exist.” (Jim: 1.05). This had been in part due to his recognition of other gods in the books about Greek myths that he had been reading. In fact, Jim claims to have had a vision of Jesus and the disciples at the age of ten, yet this did not affirm Christianity for him. Instead, it served as one of the catalysts provoking him to engage with other ‘magical’ and mystical ideas. One significant point to note is that, as mentioned in the previous chapter on Pagan literature, Jim is not unusual in discovering a love of books at a young age, yet much of his subsequent Pagan development was based on this only to a small degree.

What commonalties may we see in these stories, if they initially appear different? The content does not differ substantially, but the emphasis placed upon the components of books and experience varies between them. It is possible to see that out of these three individuals, Neil is unusual in that he does not claim to have had what are usually categorised as ‘paranormal’ experiences in his early years. To frame the stories in Pike’s (2001) analysis as mentioned above, may be to stretch the categorisation too far. Certainly there does not appear to be “loss and redemption” in all of these stories of childhood. There is a theme of ‘developing’ Pagan interests out of specific contexts, but Anne, for

example, does not appear to have ‘lost’ anything, only gained knowledge. Nevertheless, Pike has not been the only author to follow this line of argument. Rabinovitch (2000) in a far more realist sense, has stated that from the Pagan women she studied thirty-eight out of the forty interviewed had suffered some form of severe trauma in their childhood. Rabinovich revealed disturbing stories of abuse, and suggests that Pagans are using the religion to try to ‘regain’ what they lost in childhood via self-help ritual and magical practices. Evidently some very real abuse had happened to some of her respondents, yet despite this it is possible to view the stories she collected in the same manner as those given by my interviewees. These are stories that present one as struggling against something, whether that is an overpowering church, or one’s own sense of ‘rationality’ as discussed below. It is true that Pagan stories relate to self-help, but the self-improvement may be constructed within the stories themselves. The principle narrative given by Pagans can be paraphrased as, “how I did strive to improve myself”.

There is something else interesting in these initial, significant stories. Pike continues in her analysis to suggest that the themes in stories point to personal issues “cast in the language of the broader Neopagan movement” (Pike, 2001:157). This again, could be applied to many of the stories given by British Pagans. Yet, perhaps at first sight paradoxically, the reverse can also be found in those I interviewed. We would expect childhood to form the initial part of their narrative. This is the obvious place to begin a life-story. Yet what is significant here is the way in which each interviewee was able to utilise that narrative structure to present a particular image of themselves. In contrast to Pike’s assertion, this is not necessarily due to the language of the ‘Pagan’ movement³⁰. To determine exactly what this language *is* would be a difficult task in itself (not least because defining the borders of the shifting community is an essential aspect of Paganism’s own difficult project). It is a usage of concepts of childhood to present a particular self-image, that of boundless curiosity and interest. Childhood is used to frame ‘Pagan’ experience, but also experiences that are not representative of any Pagan beliefs save one: individualism. The children in the stories are shown to be “seekers” (Pike, 2001:156), but they are not *necessarily* curious about the spirit world or supernatural experiences. Neil, for example makes it clear that he rejected all religion to follow his material, scientific interests. Another interviewee, Paul, does not mention anything remotely related to Pagan ‘religion’ or anomalous experiences until later into his interview.

³⁰ Pike does say that “*many* neopagans describe themselves in childhood as children who were open to the spirit world and connected with nature. ‘Children as Seekers’, to borrow psychoanalyst Robert Cole’s phrase...” (emphasis added). But the rest of the text gives great importance to the ‘Pagan’ aspects of this.

He talks about the bullying he received at school, how he attempted suicide because of it and how he was moved from one school to another. His initial story then suggests a life without control, a lack of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994; Baumeister, 1991), and in fact his narrative continues on to show how he gained more control of his life, via involvement with a group of Pagans. It is not necessary to emphasise the ‘Paganness’ of these individual’s experiences then, as the narrative structure works either with or without Pagan stories to construct an individual in development.

To examine this further, in the accounts given by these Pagans, the theme of ‘age’ consistently takes on a highly significant role. It is possible to look even more closely and see how although consistent in its presence, it is in fact used in different ways. We may assert that ‘age’ is used as a tool akin to Harvey Sacks’ membership categorisation device (Silverman, 1998) in that on their own, the categories of ‘childhood’ and ‘grandmother’ could have a multitude of relationships, but they are applied by the interviewees to generate particular results. Looking back to the opening statement given by Anne above, it is clear for example, that her usage of “granny” and “old” is not intended to invoke ideas of decrepitude or uselessness often associated with ageing (Minichiello et al, 2000), but on the contrary, the idea of ‘wisdom’ and ‘knowledge’. This theme is continued and expanded upon further throughout Anne’s narrative, reinforcing the category. She suggests that her grandmother was free-thinking and was involved with the feminist movement. She also states that she has always found it rewarding to talk to older people, as they can talk about ‘some of the old traditions’. It may be no coincidence that Anne is older than the other Pagans interviewed, and that she has ‘organiser’ status within the Pagan community. It is possible to see in this use of categories, the way in which speakers subtly construct and give credence to their narrative identities. Anne here, a relatively elderly woman compared to many of her Pagan acquaintances, wants to be heard as wise and knowing and generates a category (‘old’) to guide this. Yet even within her narrative, she presents the central Pagan ‘improving oneself’ theme, when she states that, “I don’t want to grow stale. I’m constantly growing [...] I will constantly rethink my world” (Anne, 10/02:24.50). This duality – the traditional and stable, and the constantly developing – is found in the other life histories in various forms. It ranges from Anne’s anchoring of developing identity in knowledgeable older age, to Neil’s use of myths and legends and his consistent critical reading of occult books.

Earth/Nature

Age is not the only concept used in the opening sections of Pagan life-stories. A discussion of Pagan narrative would be incomplete without an examination of ‘earth’, a central part of much Pagan belief and ritual. We have seen how Anne, at the very beginning of her narrative, introduced the concepts of stories and folk tales, and how Neil talked about folk customs. Many others interviewed would talk about enjoying being outdoors as a child, playing in ‘nature’. It is all of these together that to many were the Pagan ‘influences’ that were around in childhood and to which Pike (2001) refers in her discussion of childhood. In telling these stories Paganism as a ‘nature-religion’ is presented. Rather than see these as a selective remembering or selection of stories that “make sense within a NeoPagan context” (Pike, 2001:157), we can see it additionally as an active construction of what contemporary Paganism ‘is’ to the speaker and their listener. Neil’s statement that his infant school was in a “villagey” location is in line with this, as it offers an image of rural, ‘communal’ life. The maypole dancing is a group performance, as is egg-rolling. Both are ‘traditional’ and are considered by many Pagans to be a forgotten part of their heritage (Hutton, 1999). Neil could have assumed that I would know this, and so in telling me the reports about the activities, he is laying down common ground from which to build.

Nature in Pagan accounts has multiple representations. Although it often features early in the narratives it would be impossible to build a picture of what the ‘Pagan’ ideal of nature is. For some it is seen as the stereotypical idyllic rurality, free from human tainting and therefore closer to the spirits of Earth. This is the most frequently given description, especially when told in the first sections of the narratives; talking about places where they grew up. Many would state how they lived in rural areas surrounded by nature and being ‘close’ to the earth. Some such as Ellie, a Pagan who grew up in Scotland, would take part in seasonal celebrations, celebrating the harvest, living around “the cycle of nature” (Ellie: 04.38). This of course is not unusual in Britain, where many churches and schools hold harvest festivals. It is interesting therefore to see how these are given as examples of events and practices that influenced individual’s Pagan development. Nevertheless, as will be seen below, these are rarely given more than a passing significance in the whole narrative. They are references given at the beginning of the life-stories creating a sense of coherence and continuity of self, despite the great changes in religious persuasion that are often described later.

It would be expected to hear of nature as central to Pagan narratives, confirming a Pagan's sense of being connected to the spirits of the earth. Yet surprisingly nature in one of the narratives was also spoken about as something to be fought against. For Jim, the forces of nature were something to be reckoned with, which would subsequently give him a feeling of self-control. He described how in a time of great depression, he used to go to the sea and “challenge” the wind:

“I found contact with the earth in many respects. I'd go out on the hills by the seaside, er dunes, and I'd stand on a hill with the wind and rain blasting away trying to blow me off and I'd challenge the wind.[...] I'd always win.” (Jim: 31.04)

This, if one were to take Pagan literature as a foundation, does not appear to fit in with Pagan belief at all. Nature is not something to be ‘challenged’ but embraced as extremely powerful (Crowley, 1994). But here Jim is claiming to have beaten it. He is evidently claiming to possess a great deal of power, despite his mental state. We cannot separate this from the rest of his narrative, where he essentially suggests that he is in a position of authority on Pagan matters, able to teach others and organise groups. This demonstrates that earth/nature can not only be described differently in Pagan narratives, but also that it can be utilised as a tool for different ends; in this case to support both claims of belonging to Pagan culture and also to show one's individual power.

Rural nature and tradition are important in many Pagan narratives because, in addition to being an aspect of the ‘religious’ belief as given in Pagan literature, they are also versatile enough to be used in multiple ways, sometimes by the same speaker. It can express a continuity between childhood and present Pagan belief, between the place of home where one grew up and present Pagan practice. The development of this belief and practice is the subject of the next section.

‘Coming Home’

A defining feature of Pagan accounts of becoming involved in Paganism is that they do not often have a singular point of transformation. There is rarely a single ‘epiphany moment’ (Denzin, 1989), where an individual becomes ‘converted’ to the Pagan faith, as one might expect from some other religions – in evangelical Christianity for example

(Stromberg 1993). We cannot say of course whether there is *in fact* a single most striking event in Pagan or Christian lives that define their ‘conversion’, but within the spoken Pagan narratives this did not appear to be significant. Rather the interviewees gave several points in their lives that built up to a gradual change in their beliefs. It was often claimed that this started in childhood, with an interaction with nature or natural ‘energies’, as discussed above, but this was by no means always the case. There were consistencies however within all the life-stories, and this related to the discovery of either knowledge, or ‘unusual’ abilities. Three common anchoring items and events stand out as notable, included in all the accounts, these are: books, anomalous events, and meetings with significant people. In the interviews these were highlighted as important, often momentous occasions and objects that brought forth some kind of realisation about the spiritual world.

Book-learning

A discussion about the significance of books within contemporary Paganism has already been given earlier in this thesis. In addition to recognising the place that literature plays in other contexts, it also emerged in the course of the interviews, as individuals talked about how particular books were important in their move towards Pagan belief and practice. Anne for example talked about how being introduced to ‘The Lord of the Rings’ was a turning point in her life, as it showed her, “how myth could feel real” (Anne: 20.52). One of the most descriptive accounts was given by Neil when he talked about how his discovery of a fortune-telling book became a “defining moment” where he began moving away from Christianity:

“One time, as I say we went to this car boot sale. And I was flicking through and there was, I’ve still got it now, this book called, er, ‘Fortune Telling with Playing Cards’ and it was just, cheap tatty old, tatty old book probably produced in the seventies or something. It was about 20p and I bought it, cause I was just interested and I remember I got home and I felt really guilty that I’d bought it, and I hid it in my top drawer [laughs]. Cause I, I’ll tell you what I thought, I thought if it’s in the top drawer, God wouldn’t be able to see it! And he wouldn’t be able to strike me down! [laughs]

[...] That was the defining moment really. When I stopped, erm, when I started moving away from Christianity” (Neil: 7.50)

This story is interesting on several counts. If we take it on face value, this was the point in Neil’s life when he unexpectedly had a powerful experience that convinced him of the lack of worth of the Christian faith in which he’d been raised for many years. From this perspective it is perhaps a little strange that such a small item, found and bought on a whim, could have such an effect. There is, however, another manner in which the event can be viewed. This story demonstrates how individuals are able to ‘anchor’ their life course to objects in narrative accounts. It also offers an insight into the process of constructing a convincing story. Neil takes what could be an insignificant object, a “cheap tatty old book”, and uses it as the axis around which his loss of faith in Christianity moved. He makes a point of stating that he bought it because he was “just interested”, thus demonstrating to the listener that what was to emerge from the discovery was momentous, via its unexpectedness. The fact that he describes the book as cheap and dated serves the same function – the item is seemingly insignificant – but by giving the added information that he still owns it, this object then become extremely consequential to the story. It is from this point of generating a significant object that the final detail of the story is added, the punch-line – that Neil was transformed by the experience - confirming the item’s importance.

With this in mind it becomes clear why books can take on such a significant role in Pagan life-stories. They are a fundamental part of Pagan knowledge and practice as discussed previously, but moreover, and perhaps due to this fact, books can be used to tell stories of transformation, whether it be movement away from a contrasting religion or movement towards Paganism. In fact Neil’s story of a significant moment in relation to a move *away* from another set of beliefs is not unusual amongst contemporary Pagans. Often there are stories of leaving one belief system prior to giving accounts of discovering Paganism. This is expected, as although there are claims to there being increasing numbers of Pagans ‘born into’ the religion (Berger, 1999), the majority of members have become Pagan after being either atheist or Christian³¹. The significant stories in the narrative then become the points where the speaker is able to use some symbol (in Neil’s case a book) to express this loss-gain relationship. These ‘discovery’ stories then form part of the greater theme of

³¹ As would be expected of Britain. In all the Pagans I have interviewed or conversed with at gatherings, very few have come from non-Christian religions. Many were nominally Christian prior to their discovery of Paganism.

self-improvement. They are the steps in the narrative – mini-epiphanies – that combine together to form the whole life-story.

The discovery of new knowledge that inspires a search for more information on Paganism does not have to stem from physical books. The age of the internet has changed the way much information is consumed and this was born out in the interviews. It was particularly true of the younger Pagans, especially those who were or had been students, and whose initial contact with alternative spiritualities was on the World Wide Web. In her life-story Ellie, a 32 year old Pagan, told of her first voyage of discovery into Paganism via the internet. She was fifteen or sixteen when she started reading Pagan websites and for her it was pragmatic reasons that led her to this medium. At that age, she had little money, certainly not enough to spend on a lot of books, and it was difficult to find the books that contained enough information at a low price. As she suggests, the internet was a “huge resource out there. You know, you put a word in and it, you know, brought you back a hundred sites that you could trawl through and find what you were looking for” (Ellie: 00.47). The gathering of information must have taken a great deal of skill to sift through all the websites and find the knowledge required, yet Ellie rose to the challenge. This image of a Pagan as a ‘seeker’ – one who actively searches for understanding and knowledge – appears frequently in Pagan life-stories. As will be seen below, it is an aspect of the individualism that lies at the centre of the narrative accounts. Ellie in fact became so involved in the internet that a great many of her friends are now known only ‘online’, it is her main contact with other Pagans. Additionally the name she uses on the internet is the one by which most of those people know her.

When she was initially reading about Paganism, Ellie also claims that she was “at that time you know I was young enough to not really have, sort of to come to the point of telling my parents or anything” (Ellie: 00.32). This statement points to the image of Paganism as a set of beliefs and practices that are hidden, only to be revealed when circumstances allow. It has links with the Pagan mythology of oppression stemming from the “witch hunts” (Greenwood, 2000). There are clear parallels with gay and lesbian ‘coming out’ (Plummer, 1995) stories and the apparent centrality of this to gay identity (Munt, 1997), yet in the Pagan life-stories, this does not appear to be as significant, only in the general sense of belonging to a minority group. The fact that one is or has been unable to tell others of one’s Pagan identity, being “in the broom closet” prior to being open about one’s beliefs, arose in the interviews on only a few occasions and this was never the

key aspect of a story. Coming out, whether homosexual or Pagan, is not a once-in-a-lifetime event, but a series of acts over time (Liang cited in Chirrey, 2003), and thus might be expected to be worked into the narrative if it were considered to be especially significant. Additionally, as Chirrey (2003) has argued, lesbian and gay coming out locutionary acts are related to acts of religious conversion, as they both require the act to integrate their identities with their friends and families. It would consequently be unusual for these not to feature in some way in Pagan narratives. How can this be accounted for?

It can be asserted that within contemporary Pagan narratives there is a conflict between 'coming out' as an essentialist notion and becoming Pagan via ones own life-choices. The former narrative is founded upon an idea of having always been Pagan and this fact thereby being out of one's own control. The latter, however, requires a positioning of oneself within the narrative as a free-thinking, clearly rational individual, whose transformation into a Pagan has come about because of choices made and knowledge considered. It is this second of the two ideas that is presented in the life-stories. The first, however, is referred to occasionally, at the beginning of the interviews, for example in phrases such as, "well I think when you look back on it you realise that you've been doing it a lot longer than you thought you had" (Dianne: 00.13). This suggests that in the narrative format, coherence is sought and these reflexive comments serve to create a continuous sense of self. It may be that the language of 'coming out' has been appropriated by contemporary Pagans as a method of stabilising identity in their narratives of transformation.

Interestingly, despite her immersion in cyberspace, as with other Pagans, it was a book, Laurie Cabot's *Power of the Witch* that directed Ellie to actually self-defining as Pagan:

"I sort of read it and went, 'ok, that's that's kind of, what I believe' and it was, you know I was kind of curious because all the things it was, it was talking about in the book kind of made sense to me" (Ellie: 06.18)

This is what Chirrey (2003) would suggest was an act of "coming out to oneself" (Chirrey, 2003:26). Yet, perhaps this is to stretch the metaphor too far as to analytically remain useful. In the context of the Pagan narrative accounts, there is a great difference between telling others about ones own Pagan identity and the recognition that there are others who

hold similar beliefs to oneself. This latter realisation is better referred to as, ‘coming home’, a phrase already used within Pagan literature. Ellie continues:

“I started reading up about it and finding out what it was really about, and, it kind of clicked really. In a way. It just sort of, it made sense.” (Ellie: 06.46)

Ellie is here claiming that the books triggered a self-realisation, that she recognised something that was part of her self. But importantly, she continues to position herself as a rational individual: it made *sense* to her. Despite the fact that the literature she discovered confirmed what she was rather than giving her a great deal of new knowledge, she is not claiming that she played no part in the process herself. The discovery required a consideration of the knowledge. She is therefore positioning herself as a free-thinking individual.

Memorable Events

The Pagans interviewed used books to locate their transformation narratives, but these were not the only points of focus in their stories. In addition to objects, memorable events took place that were somehow transformative or representative of the personal transformation that was occurring. They were highlighted as significant in the interviews by their inclusion as separate stories, and by their highly descriptive nature. Often they described ‘paranormal’ or anomalous happenings experienced by the individual, as in this following extract from an interview with John, a Pagan in his mid-twenties. He begins:

“There’s a lot of things when I was really young which like, well, I think I’ve forgot, I sort of forgot about them just rationalised them out because, I went *ultra* scientific, sort of in junior school. Right. But, when I’m looking back, I keep getting the odd little bit, which, sort of I’m going, ‘*that* was something’” (John: 07.20)

We can see in the beginning of this extract the reflexive nature of giving a life-story as he reconstructs the event. It is not insignificant that there are initially many caveats to his speech. In suggesting that he ‘rationalised out’ the memories – by which he means he sought a scientific explanation for them – he is referring to the idea of non-rational, out-of-

the-ordinary experiences. He is in effect generating a category of non-scientific reality to which he can refer in his following description of the event:

Right, the first thing I can possibly recall is, I remember basically, I must have been in second year infants or something, really *young*, but, I was so sure of these things before but, they haven't been remembered, but anyway, I remember basically, with the girl next door we saw a wolf, sort of grey, not sort of, its almost how people say you're seeing a ghost [TH:yeah] sort of thing, but it was actually a wolf, it was sort of, not like a video tape of a wolf. It was almost like a *real* wolf, which, most people couldn't see, passing through the back garden. Me and this girl, I don't know if she remembers it, but anyway. That was the very first thing I seem to recall, happening." (John: 00.07)

Here it is possible to see how John uses the structure and context of the interview to position himself in a particular way. He has already presented the category of non-scientific reality and now he is able to use this in his description of an unusual event by again invoking the category of 'youth'. We can see for example the stress he places on 'young', and by suggesting that it is difficult to remember fully he gives the listener room to believe or not believe the story. In other words, during this interview he is speaking to the Pagan identity in me, but giving himself a 'get-out clause' in case I am more sceptical than he thinks. This is reinforced by his use of qualifying language: "it was *almost* like a *real* wolf". He even states that the other witness there might not remember it at all. This type of language pattern suggests that John is trying to orient himself as what we might term 'rationally adequate'. It was common in all the life-stories collected and points towards the importance of being seen as rational in contemporary society. In fact in a search for evidence against this in the interviews (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995), there were very few cases when individuals appeared to be giving accounts without any recourse to qualifying language. In those cases where accounts of seemingly non-rational perception *were* given, the speakers would still add comments to suggest their understanding of how they would sound to a sceptic. Jim for example stated that he "saw a vision of Jesus and the disciples", but quickly adds, "which was odd" (Jim: 00.30).

Robin Wooffitt (1992) in his study of paranormal accounts, discussed the process of telling a story of an anomalous experience and argued that speakers use a two part sequence in their telling ('I was doing X when Y happened'), while simultaneously

disrupting it in order to guard against sceptical readings. This is confirmed by many of the accounts given by Pagans. Anne used this pattern in describing how she played with a ghost when she was a child: an experience that she claims influenced her considerably. She talked about her experience of playing with a girl at her aunt's house:

1. One day I was just wandering about there, where they lived, and found this little girl. To play with.
2. They had this swing hanging from a tree. And we played, for an hour or two and, played on the swing and talked.
3. I didn't feel anything unusual about it.
4. And I went and my, uncle over tea and he said 'oh what have you been doing today?'
5. I said 'oh I've been with the little girl who lives in the big house across there'.
6. He said 'there's no little girls there'...
7. He said 'are you sure' I said 'yeah we played in the swing from the tree.
8. So we went across there. (X)
9. 'Cause it was summer,
10. And he showed me the tree, and where the swing was there was two bits of rope. (Y)

(Anne: 21.24)

The last section, lines 8-10 of this extract, reveals the sequence as described by Wooffit. At line 9 Anne self-interrupts and adds, "'cause it was summer". This statement appears to have little to do with the actual content of the story; the tale would work without it. But by adding it Anne, like the other interviewees, positions herself as a rational individual. The observation that it was summer gives the story some normality: this is the sort of observation that any sane person would make. The story now has even greater effect because Y is given from the perspective of a grounded, rational viewer, and therefore is subsequently all the more momentous.

John, quoted above describing his wolf experience was not the only interviewee to state that he became extremely scientific in his outlook prior to becoming Pagan. Neil also made the same claim, as did several others. Due to this fact, it seems clear that prior religious affiliation cannot be taken to be an indicator for future involvement in Paganism. The transformative period between one religion or anti-religion and Pagan spirituality is,

in the narrative, a space where a highly individualistic self can be presented. A story describing an event, particularly if it is emotionally laden, will point the listener to its significance. Every life-story had references to some series of momentous events, but not all were paranormal in character. In fact some of the most emotionally powerful stories were from extremely mundane scenarios, as in this extract from Neil's interview where he was realising the faults of his strict Christian environment:

“I went in the RE cupboard someone dared me to, stab this bottle of PVA glue, one of those big things and I sta- I'll never forget it I stabbed it with a pair of scissors [laughs]. And this glue dripped all over the RE cabinet, and I mean all the icons were stuck to the shelf you couldn't move them. And I I actually admitted to it in the end cause I was so scared but I mean that that even in that instance *there* I thought I was going to die and I was constantly thinking that I was gonna be you know struck down for that [...] it was little instances like that that brought it out, how frightened I was” (Neil: 09.07)

What could have been a common schoolboy prank has, in Neil's narrative, become a powerful story containing the message that it was the fear of God that brought about his recognition and eventually his pre-Pagan atheism. Stories such as this one are used in the narrative accounts to help the speaker orient themselves as a person with a strong sense of individualism. This is evidenced in the surrounding stories which speak of further struggle, but ultimate change and self-development. In Neil's case, after telling this story, he spoke of the discovery of another book at his local library at the age of 14, which contained 'Pagan' celebrations and crafts. It included maypole dancing, thereby raising again the 'villagey' motif that he presented at the beginning of his life-story.

In the stories contained in Jim's narrative, he speaks of struggling against his own limitations. He gave a story that told of how he was medically discharged from the army due to his disability, and this theme of gaining self-control and power was continued throughout the rest of his life-story. In these stories therefore, as previously noted, it may be possible to see the connection with Rabinovich's (2000) claim that her Pagan interviewees had suffered abuse during childhood. A struggle against trauma is an extremely effective way of displaying individual efficacy. By placing this in the context of his change in attitude towards mainstream religion and his developing understanding of Paganism, Jim effectively sets himself up as the peak of intelligent individualism.

Magical Efficacy and Rationality

In Chapter Three the debate about the status of contemporary Paganism as either a modern or 'late modern' religion was briefly discussed. Prior to this debate being explored by Berger (1999), Luhrmann (1989) presents as the central research topic of her study into British magical practices the question of how magicians can enact irrational practices and beliefs in a rational world. She emerges with a conclusion that investments in belief are becoming increasingly weak and individuals are able to regard them with ambivalence. Although this point and her study as a whole has been criticised heavily (see Pearson, 2001), it nevertheless presents an interesting point of departure. One of the reasons why Pagans are interesting to study from a narrative standpoint is that they are well aware of their status in much of the media. They therefore have to balance both a position of separateness from scepticism, but also in order to demonstrate their 'believability', they have to demonstrate their understanding of scepticism. Ostensibly therefore, as suggested in reference to paranormal experience above, in balancing an image of rationality with that of holding seemingly irrational beliefs, Pagans in the life-story context need to show that they are simultaneously part of and apart from the Pagan community. Rather than expressing ambivalence to beliefs however, analysis of the narrative illustrates how it is possible to skilfully craft a path through the contradictions.

This skill is nevertheless tried to the limits in cases where the individual not only talks about unusual experiences that happened to them, but additionally expresses that they are magically powerful themselves, and able to produce apparently irrational results. These sorts of accounts differ from those above in their emphasis on the teller as the producer of the paranormal effects. The abilities are often claimed to have started in childhood, as in this following example, again given by John. He is talking about his ability to know the movement of a river – one of his favourite childhood places – including when it would be dangerous to play there:

“One time I remember basically, I knew I had to get, stand, sit on the bank, sort of, sort of legs dangling over the side bit, a sort of beach area [TH:oh yeah], sort of next to the trees. And er suddenly the river started coming up. And, was feeling a little bit nervous it might come up more but then I thought ‘it’s not *going* to’. And

it stopped just at that level I mean, this was after a sudden downpour flash-flood”
(John: 02.04)

He continues on to suggest that, as his grandmother stated, he would have been swept away by the river had he stayed lower. This story again can be taken as an example of presenting an adequately rational self, in the attention to detail and the references to feelings that rational individuals would have. It again follows the two-part ‘doing X when Y happened’, and the interjection of “feeling a little bit nervous” illustrates his ‘normality’. However, the rest of the story expresses magical non-rational abilities. How does he subsequently account for this? He in fact uses two acts combined. The first of these is to emphasise the naturalness of the phenomenon, suggesting that these abilities are not unusual, not really emerging ‘from’ him, but are a part of a ‘normal’ relationship with nature: “I seemed to get on well with that river” (John, 10/02:02.45). Secondly, he reinforces this by asserting explicitly that, “It’s not supernatural or anything, I just thought, I knew how to do it” (John: 03.07).

For Anne these sorts of magical abilities stem from her family roots, in particular her grandmother. In an emotional story about the loss of that relative she argued that her grandmother was aware of her impending death and took her time: “She said ‘Anne. I am going to go and see all my friends and relatives before I die.’” (Anne: 35.12). Anne stated that after visiting everyone she wished to, she passed away. Anne in her narrative used this story to make the argument that her family all possessed these abilities, and that they consequently had a natural understanding of death, stating that, “my family generally has a good time at funerals” (Anne: 36.37). Here then she is able to present the magic as normal, a natural part of her family life, thereby accounting for her understanding of it. This illustrates the reasoning behind her beliefs, and as a consequence the stories do not seem irrational.

Even in the occasions where individuals gave accounts of magical acts that did not appear to follow the pattern of highlighting nature, when talking about some magical rituals for example, the speakers consistently asserted their rationality in the sequence of their speech. Where this does not suffice, a more explicit argument may be given. Jim for example, described his love of doing ‘energy ball’ magic, describing how it gives him a sense of magical power and is nice because of its immediacy (Jim: 28.59). He then went on to explain something of its mechanics, essentially arguing that it is a perfectly logical.

rational system. The inclusion of talk of direct experience again points to the place of the individual in these accounts of authentic belief. We may paraphrase and summarise these types of stories as, “My magic works, is experiential and being based on my own experience as a rational individual, is genuine and believable”.

Reaching Out

Where is the sense of community in these accounts that is the focus of this thesis? Is it present in the life-stories? All of those interviewed met regularly with other Pagans whether it was at moots, festivals, or on online email-lists. Additionally, in their life-stories they gave reference to other Pagans they had met during their growing interest in Paganism. Often these would be people who featured in the significant stories that were told, and occasionally stories would be given relating to magical rituals conducted in groups. It is clear that the interaction with others in the Pagan community is important for the development of a sense of belonging and a Pagan identity. An example of this can be seen in this extract from Dianne’s interview below. She is describing how she came to know of a well-known Pagan called King Arthur³²:

“Around that time as well, [laughs] he whose name always crops up, ‘Arthur’ right I started thinking ‘Arthur I’ve got to find King Arthur’. Before I knew anything about him at all and I thought, ‘I’m going mad I’m going *completely* mad [...] and I was into bikes at the time [...] So, some friends and I said ‘alright we’d set up a bike club’, and said ‘what shall we call it?’ and I said ‘I know Pendragon, MCC’ [...] thought no more of it [...] next thing we’d got a letter from this bloke called Arthur” (Dianne: 11.43)

Two points are manifested in this extract. Firstly, by stating, “he whose name always crops up”, Dianne is displaying knowledge of a prominent British Pagan, and can therefore be assumed to be a member of that community herself. She does not, for example, give any indication that she is an ‘outsider’, unaware of the other members. Secondly, and perhaps more interestingly, it is possible to see how as a member of a community, an ‘initiation’ into it is reconstructed as the narrative is told. Dianne has managed to create a narrative that suggests an almost teleological explanation. ‘Arthur’

³² This is actually his real name.

appeared because of her developing interest in Pagan beliefs, particularly Arthurian legends; it is as though she was ‘destined’ to meet him. Arthur then explained to her about the magical processes that were occurring within her, telling her that he knew many people who were interested in the same things as her, helping her to find her Pagan direction.

It is evident then, that meeting and interacting with other Pagans is a significant aspect of making one Pagan. Nevertheless, the need to be viewed as a free-thinking individual remains just as strong in these stories as in the other parts of the narrative. One example of this is that Neil, prior to the interview with him at his home told me that his partner was not Pagan. He said that at the group meetings and rituals that he organises, his partner, “eats the cake. Probably only comes every so often because I invite him”. We could read this as being a statement that he is able to separate these aspects of his life. Furthermore, when describing the group’s rituals, Neil claimed that the fact that they were conducted together allowed a critical investigation of the ‘traditional’ rituals and practices given in books (Neil: 33.00). The group can therefore be seen to be a continuation of the reasoned approach to Magic. Doing magical ‘work’ in a group also evidently presents a space for bonding with others. This was expressed by Jane, a Pagan of about four years who talked about the value of being in a group situation. She had been involved in a ritual with a magical group that she had met, described as, “a group of down-to-earth people very in tune with nature wanted to work with nature. Erm, using elemental work, to, bring things a by.” (Jane: 12.07). The ritual was conducted on a piece of land that was to be sold off, so their purpose was to prevent this and save it:

“It was really nice cause, that’s where *I* started to let loose a little bit. Cause, everybody’s got their own unique little abilities, er. Like xxxx was a fantastic energy worker. Erm xxxx knew everything about, plants and trees and animals, er and xxxx was very into crystals and I was like ‘well, what’s *my* little thing here?!’ But I could sing, and the energy that we built doing chants and singing was really really nice” (Jane: 13.54)

This is a clear description of how a set of individuals can work together as a group, by each finding their own place. Jane asserts in this story her usefulness to the group, and her individual ability. She makes a claim to being unique, reinforced by her description of the

other's interests. In addition, this extract illustrates that although a ritual may be a *group* act, it is *individual* experience that a person may well gain from it.

Even when one is actively and deeply involved in a group, more so than Jane, individuality is strongly expressed in the narratives. There is an importance placed on the ability of oneself to reject 'convention' or tradition and be free to enact one's own choices. The interviewees argued that the Pagan 'path' one chooses can be as individual or eclectic as possible. Dianne, for example, asserted that "There's no reason why I can't be a Celtic Christian Druid, who you know, does the odd bit of wiccy stuff and whatever [laughs]³³" (Dianne 08/02:3.39). Jim, who originally set up a Pagan society at his university, and was involved with it for over ten years, presented his case for leaving that group. It is an interesting extract as he not only emphasises his importance within it (and in his narrative, status and power are key), but because at the end he gives an extremely powerful individual statement. This reasserts the Pagan theme of 'improving oneself' with an emphasis on the self over group:

"I'll always be a part of the mystical society, *because that's my baby*. My pride and joy. But you know, *that's* moved on for me now. For the most part. I look at it sometimes and think 'no!', but er, it's not mine, it's somebody else's now. And *that* break away has been important. And I think, the future now is more about, focussing more on, where *I'm* going, what *I'm* doing." (Jim: 36.22)

Discussion: Between the Worlds – Pagan Narrative and Late Modern Community

Pagans in their magical practice are often said to be acting "between the worlds" (Farrar, 1984; Greenwood, 2000). This chapter has shown how this is not solely the realm of magic, but also describes aptly the action needed in telling identity and community in contemporary times. Pagan narratives as seen in the life-story interviews illustrate some of the difficulties in which 'belonging' to and engaging with a late modern community present. There are two key conclusions to be drawn. The first of these relates to the place of individualism within community and the second to the importance of rationality in contingent accounts. These two themes cannot be entirely separated, as each is an aspect

³³ Dianne's laughter at this point suggests that she is aware of the contention that this comment could cause; aware, therefore, of the tradition-vs.-new debate.

of the other, both using similar processes, but they suggest wider significance in understanding community and narrative.

Initially, as a self-defining Pagan one must show a shared sense of identity with the Pagan 'community'. This is expressed in several ways. The first of these involves using the life-story structure to tell of a childhood where Pagan influences were absorbed. This is also where tales of nature, of powerful earth energies can be recounted, confirming an image of natural spirituality. Another manner in which Pagan identity can be performed is in the references to Pagan books. These are books which relate to the religion due to their content or the faith of their author and may well be part of the 'reading-list' of most Pagans. By describing the events around these books, their significance is heightened in addition to the particular identity of the speaker being strengthened. It could be argued that these processes are in fact presenting 'individual' identity, yet the final significant act firmly grounds these in community: talking about meeting and communicating with other Pagans. When these other individuals are those held in high regard by other Pagans – the Pagan 'celebrities', holding some considerable fame within the community – then the bonds with that community are shown to be strong. Knowledge of significant members is one aspect of being a member. All of these together in a narrative allow a construction of 'belonging' to be given.

Clearly, then, community, that sense of 'sharedness' and belonging, is important in Pagan life-stories. Yet, as has been shown, it is not as comfortable as it seems. In addition to demonstrating belonging, Pagans argue strongly for their individuality. The decisions to engage with the Pagan community were their own, and the acts of communing with nature were experienced individually even in contexts of working in a group. A debate about the value of 'tradition' emerges from this. This duality is played out in the stories of knowledge gained from folk tales or from elders, such as that given by Anne, as contrasted with Pagan understanding gained through individual experience, as was suggested by Neil in his reference to the use of books. This debate is particularly interesting with regard to the status of Paganism as a new, or reconstructed, religion, but is perhaps no different in other late modern communities. If 'tradition' is taken to reflect practices that are passed down from member to member, then this will be a key component in the sense of shared belonging via a shared history. Certainly in their accounts of magical practices, contemporary Pagans show involvement with these debates. More importantly for this discussion, however, is that, as has been argued above, these acts of questioning and

actively seeking, in essence, present an individualistic self. The manner in which these two apparently conflicting positions are joined in the narrative telling is one of the most significant findings to emerge from the analysis.

The second theme arising from the interviews relates to rationality and spiritual belief. This community is a community of believers. The Pagans telling their life-stories are well aware of the impression that they give in communicating stories and this accounts for the reflexive self-dialogue that occurs within their narrative passages. Paganism is a religion of spirits, gods and magical powers, yet the individuals in this community must live their identities in a society that is scientific, sceptical and potentially hostile to irrationality. As this chapter has shown, this is not an assertion based on a theory of increasing secularisation, modernity or late modernity, but emerges out of the actual telling of Pagan life-stories, as individuals attempt to manage their identities. The guardedness with which anomalous events are described and the assertion that one's magical abilities are valid both suggest a dialogue with science and rationality and the need to express a 'rationally adequate' self. Again this can be seen to present a potential conflict between membership of the Pagan faith and life in the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, the interviewees were able to combine both positions into a cohesive life-story and this more than anything else provides some clues to contemporary spirituality. Moreover, this analysis of narrative suggests an avenue with which we can understand other seemingly conflictual identities.

The theme of 'coming home' is where these two processes join. As a narrative of 'always being Pagan', it cannot be understood as a passive 'falling into place' of identity. While many Pagans referred to this idea at the beginning of telling their life-stories, the key theme to emerge from the narrative taken as a whole, is that Pagans tell their identities as individual seekers who *actively* search out others. This search for 'home', for a shared understanding and acceptance of one's own beliefs, no matter how disparate, is presented in Pagan narratives via significant events that are filtered and understood rationally. Community and belonging, rationality and individualism are combined in accounts of discovery, acceptance and life-changes.

The British Pagans interviewed all present similar themes in their life-stories. These should not, however, be seen as definitive of all Pagans in Britain. We have seen how 'tradition' for example, may be used in the conventional sense given by Anne – that of knowledge and practices from generations ago – or simply as suggesting a shared set of

practices enacted by a group. Understandings of what constitutes the 'nature' that is often at the heart of Pagan discourse varies from individual to individual, and consequently a definitive picture of Pagan life-histories would be extremely difficult, if not impossible to generate. Nevertheless, despite these differences in thematic content, the reflexive narrative practices are consistent. They illustrate how to position oneself as rational and individualistic in contemporary times, while remaining part of a collective group with a common sense of identity.

Part IV: Conclusion

Conclusion: Paganism and Contemporary Community

The preceding chapters have examined Pagan interaction in different settings, and we are now at a point where we can revisit the issues explored in Part One of the thesis to suggest conclusions about community as expressed by contemporary Pagans in Britain. It is also possible at this stage to extend the grounded analysis to examine the question of what community means in late modernity for other potential groups. The themes that are raised in this study of contemporary Pagan communities are not bounded by the membership of that religion. Indeed, if they were, this work would be limited in scope and the very idea that these themes relate to ‘community’ and not simply ‘Paganism’ would be lost. We can see, however, that issues of communality are not limited by one’s claimed membership of a group. The important observation is that it is the *claiming* that marks community, and as Cohen (1985) suggested, the way in which the boundary between one community (whether it be Pagan or something else) and another is symbolised. The preceding analysis has explored the micro-social processes involved in constructing and maintaining community, and this, as suggested in the introduction, is where the main value of this research lies. Nevertheless, before drawing conclusions about these processes, something should be noted of how this research aids the understandings of contemporary Paganism itself.

Contemporary Paganism in Britain

The approach taken by many other researchers towards contemporary Paganism presents enormous difficulties in application. Authors such as Harvey (1996b), Hutton (1999), Adler (1986), Greenwood (2000) and to an extent, Berger (1999) and Pike (2001) have attempted to define the beliefs, character and religious content of Pagans in Britain and the United States. The difficulty with this is that it requires a homogenisation of the object of study; and yet upon close examination, a homogenous collective is simply not there. The research done for this thesis has demonstrated that individuals align themselves with ‘Paganism’ for extremely varied reasons and are committed to its multiple gods, goddesses and magic in differing degrees. But more fundamentally, it has been possible to see how regardless of these underlying ‘motives’ for a member’s adherence to the religion, the processes of membership are similar and can be observed. While one may wish to claim that an individual can identify as a Pagan, thus claiming Pagan ‘identity’.

there is no escaping the fact that the Paganism to which they identify is part of a wider collection of individuals, texts and practices. Pagan identity is thus an aspect of the communal practices explored in this thesis.

The most recent texts on contemporary Paganism have suggested that the religion is moving towards the creation of permanent institutions (Berger, 1999; Pike, 2001). In suggesting this, these authors might be viewed as placing Paganism within a framework of organised 'accepted' religion, much as other Pagans enter into debates over the standing of their religion in law. In the research conducted for this work, however, very little evidence has been observed that points towards this rationalisation. As seen in the analysis of Pagan life stories, there remains a vehement individualism that while clearly not anarchic, nonetheless suggests a lack of desire for centralised organisation. With members of Pagan gatherings attending for multiple reasons, it is difficult to see how it could happen in the short term. As we have seen, Pagan community as expressed in small groups does not fit well in the macro-social mould given by Berger; and while it may be the case that institutions of sorts emerge, such as the Pagan Federation, the hold that this has over the practices of its membership seems limited at best.

Other research has suggested that contemporary Paganism, among other things, has the potential to liberate selves and change identities. This appears to be in conflict with the above assertions, but as Greenwood (2000) and Pike (2001) in particular have argued, Pagan religious practice provides a bounded space in which this can occur. Consequently, these seemingly 'postmodern' readings of Paganism equate well with similar readings of other 'fluid' spaces, such as those assessing online interaction (Turkle, 1995). These contexts may also be viewed as spaces with which to explore one's own identity, but they remain as bounded as a Pagan camp, ritual or workshop.

This is not to suggest that research into 'Paganism' cannot continue to be fruitful. In fact there are several avenues within contemporary Paganism that have been explored relatively little. For example, the relationship between masculinity and Pagan worship could be an interesting topic that deserves further study, especially as work has been published from a Feminist perspective on the feminine and Witchcraft (Griffin, 1995). Future research could also focus on the interaction between contemporary Paganism and the more mainstream religions. One of the contested boundaries of Pike's (2001) study lay between the festival goers and nearby neighbours, including members of conservative

Christianity. In Britain, “interfaith” is hot on the lips of many Pagans, particularly within the Pagan Federation, and the interplay between these religious groups could provide deeper analysis of those processes of homogenisation that Berger (1999) observed. Academic networking groups such as the *Nature Religion Scholars List*³⁴ and academic journals like *The Pomegranate*³⁵, indicate the establishment of a ‘Pagan Studies’ discipline in future years.

Theorising Community in Late Modernity

This thesis began with a chapter devoted to theories of community, selecting three that were most suitable for a study of late modern group interaction. Finally, we are at a point where after detailed observation and analysis we can assess the suitability of these theories when applied to actual groups in contemporary times. A useful question to ask is whether contemporary Paganism constitutes a community in and of itself. This can be answered by examining the ways in which Pagans themselves use the conceptions explored in Chapter One. As we have seen in this thesis, there are seemingly two ways in which Paganism could be conceived of as a community. The first is as a symbolic expression of togetherness. At times in the thesis mention has been made of the ‘wider’ Pagan community, and it is in this sense that Paganism as a symbolic community in itself exists. In all of the contexts explored, ‘symbols’ as defined by Cohen (1985) have been used that suggest a boundary between Paganism and other communities. This was seen in discourses about appearance or talk of manufactured items at camps and moots. More fundamentally, the overarching symbol, that of ‘community’ itself, emerged at times of conflict such as at the campfire at the *Astarte* camp. It is clear that at times members make reference to Paganism as a symbol of the wider social identity to which they, and ‘all’ other Pagans belong. In this manner the members of the *British Pagans* email list were able to accept the fact that despite all their perceived differences with Pagans in the United States, they all belong to the category, ‘Pagan’. While some may argue that in this example it is not a community in the sense that members never interact, undoubtedly individual Pagans view it as such.

The second sense in which Paganism can be understood as a community is as a set of integrated processes that although altered by context, work across all settings. It is in this

³⁴ <http://chass.colostate-pueblo.edu/natrel/index.html>

³⁵ <http://www.equinoxpub.com/journals/main.asp?jref=51>

sense that the themes outlined in Chapters One and Two rise again to the surface. We can begin by revisiting Tönnies (2001) and his assertion that Community is something different to 'Society'. It is apparent in each chapter that the sense of community as expressed in the concept of *gemeinschaft* remains significant even in contemporary times. While many have claimed that Tönnies in his characterisation of *gesellschaft* is illustrating the demise of community, in his own words he suggests that community and society coexist: "in both cases they exactly represent the nature of the *social bond*" (Tönnies, (2001: 131 emphasis in original). Pagans in their interaction illustrate the existence of *gemeinschaft*-type relationships. We can assert this by recalling the central point that Tönnies makes of *gemeinschaft*: He suggests that unlike *gesellschaft*, it is 'natural'; it is the organic and close-knit Community in opposition to impersonal and distant Society (Tönnies, 2001). Pagans attending a moot or ritual, or meeting online each day are, in those instances when they meet, every bit as close knit as we would expect of other communities. They will defend each other from perceived threat, offer support in times of need and provide as Jennie stated in relation to Pagan camps, "a sense of community" (Jennie, August 2002). The difference between conceptions of *gemeinschaft* ascribed to Tönnies and British Pagans is that members are not 'born' into Pagan communities in the same sense as members of a local village might be born into their local community. Pagans 'join' the community through engaging with other members at moots and other gatherings.

The naturalness of contemporary Pagan community is only possible because the processes of membership are subtle in their action. The preceding chapters have explored these in some detail and can be summarised here. Firstly, the issue of 'location' should be addressed. Community as expressed by Tönnies in the first part of *Community and Society* is strictly an aspect of geographical location; he is in effect talking about the difference between a rural village and the urban city. In late modernity, however, location in this sense becomes less important. As we have seen, Pagans meet at different locations depending on the context and in the case of the *British Pagans* email list might never have face-to-face meetings. We have seen, however, that location remains an important aspect of the structuring of community. Online, individual's location determines how they can access the group, and they will make reference to it in their talk. We can consequently question recent characterisations of "virtual community" and its lack of location as not 'true' or 'real' community (Driskell and Lyon, 2002), because location in this form is present. In the 'physical' settings explored, location also exists in the proxemics of

community. Maffesoli (1995) suggests that proxemics and its extension into territoriality is what defines contemporary community. Without a doubt this conclusion causes difficulties in our examination of Pagan gatherings which may move location many times. Yet, as illustrated in Chapter Four, physical territory emerges as a communal force in the way it is used in interaction. In many cases the participants may not actually be at a location simultaneously, but they will talk about it in a way that creates a bond.

Territory and location are highly significant in being a symbol to which members can anchor their memories and construct a shared sense of history. We can conceivably see a transition from shared history as physically bounded to late modern use of physicality in talk. Whereas in Tönnies' original conception of *gemeinschaft*, member's connection to and shared history in their physical home is what generates community, in contemporary times the physical becomes unanchored and free to maintain community within discourse. This raises the point that, despite Pagans often meeting only monthly or even less frequently than this, the collection of events over time is still an important consideration. While the postmodern reading of Maffesoli's *tribus* would suggest that powerful communal bonds can occur even amongst individuals who have no history together, the observations in this thesis suggest that this is not always the case. Maffesoli argues that the *puissance* inherent in humans is what drives the desire to form community, but fails to provide any substantial empirical evidence for the claim. The analysis of Pagan groups while unable to explore the hidden 'drives' of communality, has at least shown that many groups require some form of history in order to provide the structuring of community. This history may be 'real' or symbolically generated in discussion, but it is significant nonetheless.

Community does not simply appear out of nothing; it is a process of interpreting and incorporating different social interactions over time. This period of time may be long, as in the discussions that refer back to previous camps and events at moots that occurred several years ago. It may also be remarkably short, as in cases where strangers participate in rituals and yet manage to create a coherent group within that space. In Chapter Five we saw how even those with no knowledge of Pagan ceremony are able to manifest a structuring of interaction that builds to form a satisfying group ritual. One element of this is the collection of small social 'rituals' that appear to generate 'preferred' responses, often simply repetition. One way in which we might wish to understand this is by referring to the social psychology explicated in Chapter Two that presented studies of the

influence of group norms. The ethnographic work raised one theme that consistently arose and that could be considered to be a 'norm' in its regularity. This is the respecting of personal knowledge over 'book' knowledge and members' willingness to accept personal experience as evidence of authenticity of membership of Paganism as a symbolic community.

Authenticity is significant because it is argued that in late modernity the idea of a stable self-identity is eroded (Gergen, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 2000). As Giddens argues, self-identity is not a collection of traits, but is instead "the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of his or her biography" (Giddens, 1991: 52). This was most apparent in the last chapter that examined Pagan life histories. As was illustrated in the analysis of these in-depth interviews, Pagans construct their narratives in a way that suggests coherence within a framework of rationality and individuality. The difficulty that Pagans have – and we could posit that other non-Pagan individuals have the same difficulty – is that they must construct their narrative as both an individual and as a group member. They manage to do this by asserting their rational questioning and 'seeking' of knowledge and experience. By being a seeking Pagan, they mark themselves out as not simply a 'follower'; it is consequently possible to be both part of Paganism and yet not a Pagan 'like the others'. Being part of and yet apart from is the tension that is part of contemporary belonging.

The late modern community must therefore contend with the instability of self-identity and its complementary questioning of claims to truth. Chapter Three explored briefly the different discourses of academic Pagan study and non-academic Pagan texts. These discourses emerged in later analysis of Pagan groups when their members claimed to hold knowledge of magical practices or religious history that was contested by other members. We can see subsequently how knowledge becomes a contingent process of referring to academic and personal expertise. Paganism is perhaps notable by its strong relationship with its literature, but there is no reason to suggest that other groups are any different in their conversations with knowledge. A conclusion to emerge from this is that the characterisation of membership according to 'status' is questionable. What is status in contemporary community? It is clear that in the ethnographic analysis, certain individuals were emphasised over others. These were without a doubt the members who showed the most 'commitment' to the communities, and were usually the people who organised moots, rituals or camps. They can be considered to be the celebrities that are recognisable to

other members. Nevertheless, the other members are no less important for their lack of explicit leadership. The principal observation is that different individuals participate in different ways. For some, participating in a moot means presenting some speech or talk; for others it is simply enough to be there in the space. In the language given in Chapter Two these people would be playing different ‘roles’, but we need not subscribe to an idea of ‘front’ or ‘backstage’ performance (Goffman, 1959) in order to account for this. We can simply observe that together, speakers have an audience and the audience can use the speaker’s talk in their discourses of Pagan practice.

The importance of Context

All of this would appear to suggest that context is only a minor factor in late modern community. In exploring the interactions of Pagans in different settings, we are able to see that context does shape the way community is practiced in specific ways. While the processes of doing community remain the same in many respects, the context is significant in that it influences how those processes are put into action. At a conference, for example, the potential for charismatic leadership is greater, as there is a clear separation between the speaker on stage and those listening below. Whether this means that the speaker can influence the others or not remains less significant than the fact that the setting enables discussion to occur on that topic. The celebrity might claim to have the ‘truth’, while the audience in disagreeing with them create bonds with each other. It is clear that at a camp there are other opportunities with which community can be constructed. The camp is a space where rituals can occur and participants can subsequently talk into the night around the fire, debating the shape of the ‘liminal’ community. Physical structures such as stone circles or altars and shrines act as other resources with which members can find commonality and difference. The act of being in ‘nature’ – itself a symbol in Pagan discourse – can additionally support their claims to be close to the environment, something that can be discussed in other settings such as moots. Similarly, in a ritual setting an individual is able to show physically their knowledge of Paganism in their expertise in performing magic.

Yet, context can be seen in an even more micro-scale. One of the clearest examples can be understood within the offline/online dichotomy posed by the ‘virtual’ community of the list-serv. It is clear that the online environment gives members resources that are unavailable to them in other contexts. For example, in the expression of expertise or

authenticity of being Pagan, online one is able to simply forward relevant information, or link to an online article. Nevertheless, as suggested in Chapter Five, attempting to categorise this community in terms of genre or style is difficult, because different styles and genres are used within one list. Rather than classify the virtual community as one context, then, we can understand it as a set of contexts that hold together in the space. An illustration can be seen in the way the boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’ can move as conversations move. Something that may be classified by members as ‘fluffy’ one minute can be defended the next; an explanation of a magical practice can become a symbol used to argue against another member’s authenticity. Contexts unquestionably affect interaction, but the bounds of community do not lie at the bounds of a location or setting. Rather, late modern community or *gemeinschaft* exists in the shifts of debate and discourse, in the physical and non-physical acts of knowledge, and in the ‘natural’ social processes of groups.

Epilogue

In addition to the conclusions about community in late modernity that have been ‘discovered’ during the course of this research, there is one more ‘finding’ briefly to be noted. It has been said many times that methodology and the outcomes of research cannot be separated (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997; Silverman, 1993; Bryman, 2001). This is, as in all research, also the case in the preceding thesis. The methods of participant observation and life-story interviewing were used to find the ‘meanings’ of community in several settings, but in order to understand these meanings, indeed in order to understand the settings, the researcher must be part of it. This is the ever-present quandary of the hermeneutic circle and raises difficulties in the ethnographic aim of ‘being there’ in the community. How can the process of collecting data be cleanly separated from the analysis of it and the subsequent writing of results? Clearly it cannot. The dilemma of inquiry exists in two forms, essentially that of the researcher’s own ‘bias’ towards particular concepts, and the contingency of method. The first of these was addressed by conducting the research within the framework of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), continuously revisiting the data and field while simultaneously generating codes and then theory. In this way, each conclusion was tested against the data, forming in a sense, a ‘proof process’. The second aspect of the hermeneutic puzzle is expressed in concrete form in the understanding of context. The study laid out in the previous chapters illustrated that community exists in all settings but is shaped by the context. Yet we must recognise that it is not simply that context is ‘out there’ as some sort of invisible force that shapes talk and interaction. Instead, the context within which research is done is constructed as part of the research process. It is in fact a continuous construction and reconstruction.

As was seen in the chapter exploring the *British Pagans* email list, ‘being there’ is a process of embodiment. Recall the quote by Markham:

To be present in cyberspace is to learn how to be embodied there. To be embodied there is to participate. To participate is to know enough about the rules for interaction and movement so that movement and interaction with and within this space is possible. (Markham, 1998: 23).

This does not apply solely to online research. In all of the contexts studied in this thesis, the ‘rules for interaction and movement’ have been at the centre. They have been both the object of study and the method of entry into study. At the beginning of each chapter a short section described how I located myself in each setting. At moots for example, I had to decide on my physical location and how I would interact with others. The ethnographic method would suggest that this was a period in which I should find a position within the group that would give me a clear understanding of the community (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995), but it must be recognised that in this process the researcher does not gradually become invisible. When one is in a setting, the process of ‘immersion’ is actually an analytical process. It is impossible to be an observer without interacting with the context one is observing. Even if I had chosen to sit on the sidelines of the moot, this act would position me in particular way that would affect both my interpretation of the object of study and individual’s interpretations of my action.

The chapter on narrative provides a clearer example of this contingency of context. Firstly, when setting up an interview, the potential interviewee will ask of the reasons for the request, often additionally inquiring as to the background and purpose of the research. One can decide to be entirely overt about one’s intentions or ‘blur’ the edges of an introductory explanation in the hope that some less biased data will emerge, but whichever approach is taken, *some* shaping must take place. The context of the research for Chapter Seven is therefore constructed before any study has actually happened. Within the interview, further shaping can be seen to occur. One of the conclusions to emerge from analysis was that Pagans create their life stories in ways that assert rationality over irrationality. Clearly, the subject being interviewed is not unaware of who they are telling their story to: an apparently ‘rational’ academic. We could argue therefore that actually my shaping of the interview as a rational context within which we would talk about their involvement in Paganism affected the talk, and subsequently observations emerged that noted how Pagans talk about their ‘involvement’ (in which notions of community are inescapable) and their rational identity. In simple terms, I got what I asked for.

It is not simply the constructed contexts of data collection that affect the conclusions to emerge from research. The writing of those conclusions is also shaped: it is another context that involves author and reader. In a sense the first three chapters of this thesis that explore literature of community, Paganism and processes of small groups have the added responsibility of being an expression of ontological and epistemological bias. The

manner in which 'community' is understood by the sociologist and reader will affect the way in which the topic is approached, and the subsequent shaping of the research context. The research object in the 'field' does not exist until one interacts with it, whether through interview, observation, or theory. Berger (1999) had the problem of defining her community and looked to notions of communities of memory and organisation: my own approach was to begin with observation and interview, but both are in and of themselves part of the creation of the research object. The subsequent writing-up of the thesis required the construction of other 'objects'. An obvious example can be found in each chapter, where actual names of towns, cities, places and people, have been replaced by pseudonyms. This required the creation of names that somehow represent the setting or subject under study. If one is to attempt to remain 'accurate' to the original data, these false names should in some way represent the 'true' originals. The 'community' that is subsequently described is comprised of constructed (fictitious) names in a manufactured contingent setting that is presented in another context, that of an academic thesis. This is not to devalue the research. It simply points to the importance of understanding interaction in context and how interaction *creates* context. It also suggests that research conceived of as a process of 'discovery' is questionable.

Appendix One: The emergence of the researcher: A personal account

One of the themes of this thesis has been to show how, in using a methodology that searches for observable interaction and behaviour, one is able to illustrate some of the ways that community and a ‘sense’ of community (*gemeinschaft*) can be observed. In doing this, it is reasonable to expect that the account will ignore most of those non-observable features of research, as, within the context of a thesis and its reader, they may be seen to cloud the issues at hand. Yet, in doing research, these seemingly invisible, ‘internal’ aspects are ever-present. While we may not want to include them in an argument about the observable ‘ethno-methods’ (Garfinkel, 1967) of research or community, it is perhaps helpful to explore them briefly here, if only so that future researchers who might happen to come across this thesis in their desperation at the library can at least know that they are not alone in their concerns. This appendix, then, includes some of the contextual processes (and some ‘internal’ concerns) that were involved in the creation of the preceding pages.

A community of Bodies

If it had been possible to observe the sessions between myself and my supervisor, it would have been striking that early on in the research, two themes were predominant: the methods of research and my identity as a researcher. The first of these related specifically to physicality and its ‘limitations’ on research. Consider these extracts from my fieldnotes at the beginning of the research period:

I find myself in a corner, managing to find a (high) stool, and being introduced to some other members of the group. (0205)

Everyone in the back room is in one corner. Jonathon is there, sat in the same seat as last time. [...] I sit down on a stool to form basically a circle, but there’s a woman sat right in the middle (because of the arrangement of the chairs), so I end up behind her, a bit frustrating as I feel an outsider to what little conversation is going on. (0104)

I realise that we are sat rather out of it, along side one wall, while there appears to be a conversation between Phillip, Bob, and some others (who have their backs turned to us) and now Jonathon and the other people who came in, sitting in the middle of the pub. [...] We move next to Jonathon, that way I feel we are physically in the centre of things. (0103)

It is easy to see how preoccupied I was with where I was sitting. These decisions about where to locate oneself when doing field research are not trivial ones, yet they may take second place in methods texts to the processes of ‘gaining access’, ‘building rapport’ or finding a ‘gatekeeper’ (Bryman, 2001). Hammersley and Atkinson’s (1995) often cited book on ethnography ignores these seemingly mundane matters, focussing instead on the often emotional and ethical difficulties of field relations³⁶. In my own research for this thesis, finding an appropriate place to sit was a major concern, as I tried and failed to make myself invisible while accessing the data I felt I needed. Simple yet significant decisions over where to sit at a moot, where to set up my tent at a camp or who to sit next to at Pagan conferences all affected the data that was collected and subsequently analysed.

It is useful therefore to put into practice Silverman’s (1993) suggestion that ethnographers ‘look as well as listen’ and apply this not simply to the detached physical setting that one is located in, but actually the interaction that the observer has with that setting. The physicality of research may be trivialised, passed-away or solved by reference to research methods, but they are more significant than this. Space, gesture and location (or ‘proxemics’) is an aspect of observation that remained in the forefront of my understanding of what was ‘going on’ in the settings, and which, with hindsight, perhaps influenced my analysis and its emphasis.

The ‘Identity’ of the Researcher

When I began the ethnographic observations for this thesis, I found it difficult not to focus intently on the above issues of physical behaviour. One may suggest that this is not a bad thing, as the emphasis of the subsequent analysis was on observable actions. However, for much of the early research period, the actions that concerned me most were my own.

³⁶ They do discuss briefly the difficulties of which clothing decisions to make, however.

Although I had practical experience of participant observation, via the earlier training in my Master's course, this was the first time I had engaged in a lengthy ethnographic study, visiting repeatedly the same site and the same characters. It created a tension in me that was hard to release, and, as my supervisor could attest to, much of it was released in his office. The central issue was that I felt constantly ill-at-ease with my status as a researcher in settings where frequently, personal interaction and discussion was occurring. We had agreed early on that the research was to be 'covert' in the sense that I would not constantly be informing *everyone* that I am in the meetings to do research. Soon I became more comfortable, as I realised that other members were at the meetings for extremely varied reasons. However, before this occurred, I 'came out' in full view of everyone.

I had been sitting in a moot listening to the post-talk debates about the nature of doing magic, when I could not prevent myself from wondering what other members thought about my own experience. Several months of soul-searching had not yet developed into the comfortable attitude that I was later to adopt and when the moment arose where I thought I could 'kill two birds with one stone', both asking for interviewees and making sure that people were comfortable with me researching these meetings, I took it. I announced to all present that "as most of you now know, I am researching a PhD on these topics..." Obviously a belief had emerged in me that this would reduce my internal tension over the ethics of my research method, while increasing my interviewee base. Yet, the whole incident was essentially an anti-climax. The individuals I asked about the possibility of interviewing were happy to do so, even suggesting some more names to add to my list, but the sheer irrelevance of my 'coming out as a researcher' to most of the people there was surprising to me. Only one person subsequently asked me about my research, and they too were studying at university.

I had been relieved that I no longer felt a need to strive to be a 'perfect' Pagan. Evidently, I had begun the research with the assumption (even if I denied it at the time) that there was such a phenomenon as a 'Pagan identity', and that I should try to fit in with it, in order to make myself as invisible as possible, and therefore access the most 'natural' data. This turned out to be irrelevant of course, as my focus was transferred further to the multiple actions of individual members, and a realisation occurred that it was not so much 'Pagan-ness' that I was looking at, but the practices of building and maintaining a shared sense of community. One of the key practices involved in being a member of a community came quickly to me, as it was simply the need to be present in the setting. Soon, I also felt able

to take part in the shared history of the other members, as I engaged in talk with them, and took part in rituals, festivals and moots. My identity, then, if we wish to use that term, was both ‘researcher’ and ‘Pagan’, but most importantly, it was ‘social actor – the same as everyone else.

New Research Tools

The above account should make it apparent that the researcher cannot be considered to be a neutral ‘tool’ that merely absorbs raw data in the field, pulls it apart and spits it out as a finished product. The research process, as became strikingly apparent to me, is an ongoing reflexive one. This reflexive questioning extends beyond the field, to the subsequent analysis and the other ‘tools’ used, whether it be paper, scissors and highlighter pens, or in more recent years, computer-aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). I used such software, Atlas.ti (<http://www.atlasti.de>), to analyse my fieldnotes throughout the entire research period. It may be helpful to list some brief issues that arose from this.

It should be recognised that Atlas.ti has as its foundation the grounded theory method. Sticking to this method closely and properly is difficult, and rare. The software subsequently becomes something less than it was originally intended to be. Atlas.ti was extremely useful for me; it allowed me to code my fieldnotes and draw out from them the key categories and theories that make up this thesis. I soon realised in this process that software does not necessarily make life ‘easier’. Coding is time-consuming and laborious whichever tool is used. At times it can be thrilling to feel that one has discovered something in the notes, but often I found that the creative aspect of analysis took place outside of the software, on scraps of paper, and in notebooks with my own hand-drawn diagrams of networks of codes. The network diagram elements of the software are perfect for this, but it became easy to simply pass time going deeper and deeper into the codes only to find that I was getting nowhere. There is something to be said for the old method of paper and pen, as it was during the times that I used these that realisation often came. It was also in these times, of course, that the ‘grounded’ aspect to the research was lost somewhat.

The danger, as I now recognise is that CAQDAS may not bring one closer to the data as intended. In fact, at times, I felt that the data was becoming more distanced and I needed to see my original ‘scratchnotes’ and fieldnotes and write directly on them. Nevertheless, where the software really came into its own was with the coding of audio. Although only

at an early stage of its development with this medium, the ability to link codes and memos to extracts of audio, complete with their original intonation, pauses and non-verbal sounds kept the data ‘alive.’ This is significant only when one’s methodology is considered deeply, however. If, as I am now doing in my post-doctoral work, the researcher is to address data on the scale of conversational objects in contingent interaction (Conversation Analysis), it is sometimes preferable to distance oneself from the actual recording in order to focus on the analytical issues at hand. Software, like the other ‘tools’ of research (including researchers themselves), are parts of a contingent process of making the research object understandable and understanding it. This process is ongoing in every context and is one of the things that makes doing research itself inspiring and worthwhile.

Appendix Two: Method of Life-story interviewing

The method was chosen in order to afford interviewees opportunities to give detailed stories about events in their life. The interviews were unstructured except for the request that they write “significant moments” on a drawn line that represented their life, and subsequently talk about them. This inevitably structured their talk in a broad sense, but usually served as a platform from which they could lead into lengthy accounts of events. Figure 3, below, is an example taken from one interview.

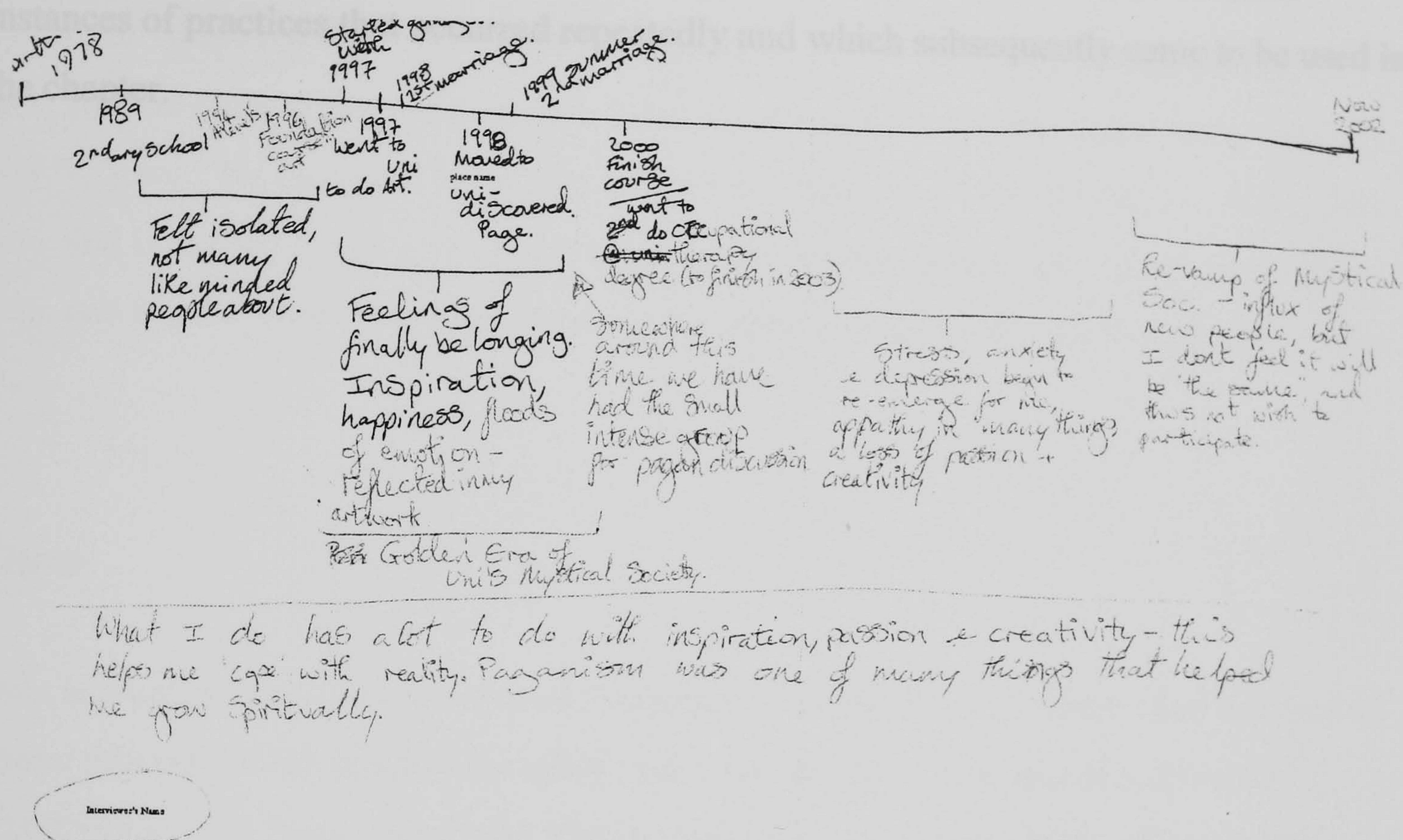


Figure 3. Time-line from life-story interview with Paula

In all, 14 full life-story interviews were conducted. This is in addition to informal ‘interviews’ that took part with Pagans at moots and other meetings. More interviews would perhaps have been desirable, but time did not allow it, in addition to constraints placed on the schedule by potential interviewees who changed their minds or whose circumstances changed. Interviews were recorded using either minidisk or cassette, and most took place in the Pagan’s own home. Two interviews were conducted at a Pagan camp, and two in cafés, fortunately a relatively private space was found in both of these, and the quality of the recording was sufficient for analysis.

These recorded interviews were done during 2002/2003 and the audio was converted into mp3 format and then coded using Atlas.ti software. There was subsequently no need for full transcription of the interviews, as the use of direct audio and software allowed many of the same initial aspects of analysis to take place: repetitive listening, and focusing on particular elements of interest in the interview. However, in order to facilitate this process, a summary of the themes and key aspects in the narrative telling was written down, along with references to the time-code used in the software. This then acted as a visual aid, which was used together with the audio to help find themes and practices that occurred within different interviews. Finally, more detailed transcription was done on those instances of practices that occurred repeatedly and which subsequently came to be used in the chapter.

Appendix Three: Prominent Characters

In the preceding thesis, several characters emerge repeatedly, often being the Pagan ‘celebrities’ that are known by other members at events. There follows a brief summary of some of them in order to aid the reading of the thesis.

Phillip

By far one of the most prominent individuals at the events attended, Phillip is a middle-aged, middle-class white male who has been involved in the British Pagan movement for over 30 years. He has lived in various locations around the North of England during this time, and is consequently well connected with the various groups around the area. He hosts one regular moot and often stands in for other organizers should they ask him to do so.

Anne

Anne is another long-time member of Paganism in the North of England. She has moved around this part of the country for many years, but settled in Northtown and began organizing a moot there. Anne and Phillip were very close at one point, although this never developed into a full relationship. She now lives with her younger boyfriend, after moving to a nearby city, which was prompted by, among other things, a falling-out between her and some members of the Northtown moot.

Jonathon

Jonathon is well-liked in the Pagan community. He is one of the more politically-motivated Pagans who was involved in anti-defamation campaigns in the past. This has been one of his motivations for organizing moots and camps in Northtown and elsewhere, and until recently he could be found traveling to moots and conferences all over the region. With a sharp sense of humour and wit, Jonathon is often entertaining, although should a contentious topic arise, he very strongly defends his position.

Bob

Of all the prominent members, Bob is the one that newcomers will very quickly learn about. Perhaps because of his continuing presence at several moots, or his self-published texts (often on the internet), he is one of the members that others will refer to in conversation of past moots and camps. In other words, he is a key person that knowledgeable members of the community talk about, even if they have not met him in person.

Joanne

Joanne was not known to many members of the Northtown or Westcity moots until she created the *British Pagans* email list. She never appeared at these moots, but many individuals were members of both spaces and so knew of her. After the conflict on the list, and her departure, she was not referred to again in my presence. She was a transitory member therefore, but one who for a substantial period of time influenced the interactions of other members.

Appendix Four: Example Life-Story

Attached to this thesis is an audio CD recording of one life story collected for the research. It is the story given by Anne, recorded at her home (you can hear her clock ticking at times, and the voice of her cat). Her boyfriend was sometimes present during the interview but only commented once in the recording, spending most of the time in another room. Unfortunately, due to technical problems with the recording equipment, some of the interview appears corrupted halfway through. This does not significantly affect the quality of her story or her way of telling it however; this interview was chosen as the example as it contains the 'paranormal' experience referred to in Chapter Seven. The audio has been edited to remove any personal names and place-names that could easily allow identification of the interviewee.

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